

Geographies of Violence

Site-Oriented Art and Politics at the
Mexico-U.S. Border

From the 1980s to the Present

Paula Brailovsky Ruiz

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I, Paula Brailovsky Ruiz, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

Through a series of case studies, analysed via the theoretical framework of site-specificity, this thesis explores the ways in which artists, from the 1980s to the present, have attempted to critically represent and understand more fully the socio-political fabric of the Mexico-U.S. border and the systemic violence that undergirds it. The introduction discusses the historical and political context of the thesis, establishes its methodological territory and outlines the current research of this field. Chapter One focuses on the collective Border Art Workshop/Taller the Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF) arguing, with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnival, that these artists tried to propose an new and more amicable narrative of the Mexican and U.S. history. Chapter Two focuses on performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña whose work, created at the height of the institutionalisation of multiculturalism, analysed the role of capitalism in creating and sustaining attitudes that operated along the pernicious lines of race and nationality. Chapter Three examines Ursula Biemann's video-essay *Performing the Border*, where the artist analyses female deskilled labour carried out in sweatshops in northern Mexico. I examine how she attempts to represent the hypermobility of capital vis-à-vis the physical immobility of the assembly plant worker. Chapter Four deals with Chantal Akerman's film *From the Other Side*, arguing that her focus on landscape not only reveals how national narratives are often tied to representations of landscape, but also offers valuable insights into the journeys that migrants have to endure in order to cross the border. Chapter Five reviews the work of Teresa Margolles and her engagement with the so-called 'drug war' that has witnessed deaths in the tens of thousands. She uses bodily fluids obtained from victim's corpses—often vaporised thus invading the nostrils of her audience—and in doing so she forces an unprecedented encounter with a section of the population unmatched by visual systems of representation. Providing a counter-narrative to the triumphalist renderings of globalisation, my aim is to underline how the category of the nation-state still remains the dominant frame of our current political reality.

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Introduction

Is there a future beyond the rigid confines of the nation-state? Perhaps after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 it felt within reach but a contemporary study of the border that separates Mexico from the United States does little to encourage such dreams. Metaphors of the border are almost always negatively framed: it is often described as a wound, a scab, an abyss, a zone of bloody and sometimes deadly conflict, a field of struggle, a 'no man's land.' As a territory, it is visualised in various ways: as an arid and desertic landscape, a monochromatic terrain that is seemingly lifeless and unfertile, where nature's hostilities take their toll on the region's inhabitants and, most of all, on illegal migrants that often lose their life in this deadly crossing. Cartographically, it is represented as a line on a map. In the landscape it is sometimes marked by highly sophisticated and seemingly impenetrable walls; by flimsy porous fences that are more symbolic than utilitarian; and by official ports of entry pushed against a swarm of cars. One of the most often cited passages in the academic literature of the Mexico-U.S. borderlands is cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa's claim in her seminal book *Borderlands/La Frontera* of 1987:

The US-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it haemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture[...] Borders are set up to [...] distinguish *us* from *them* [...] A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary [...] The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants [...] Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot [...] Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger.¹

As Anzaldúa's claim reflects, the border is a violent place. It is a territory that bleeds because it is a system of exclusion, a dividing line between 'us from them.' Its brutal effects are felt at both the psychological and physical level: it is created by 'emotional

¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), pp.25-26. Unless otherwise stated all the translations from Spanish are my own.

residue' but it also a place where 'death is no stranger.' Discussing the representation of the borderlands, artist and activist Bertha Jottar who has worked extensively with the artistic production of the region has, more recently, also compared the border to an open wound:

[...] The border is always represented as a wound that has to be healed, that has to be closed, that has to be protected, from contamination and from disease [...] We have to heal this wound through various systems of militarization, purification, cleansing, it's a surgical place, like an operating room [...]²

In this dissertation, I will analyse the link that exists between geography, space and violence in relation to the Mexico-U.S. border unpacking and analysing the metaphor 'the border bleeds.' Space and its representations are far from inert actors or backdrops for human behaviours but rather active participants. Space produces effects. There is a link between territory and violence. Political theorist William E. Connolly has pointed out that the word 'territory' derives from the Latin root *terrere*, meaning 'to frighten, to terrorize, to exclude.'³ Resonating with Anzaldúa's claim that the border is an exclusory system, French philosopher Étienne Balibar, arguably the most sophisticated theorist on borders, has also pointed out how borders, by the very act of exclusion, exert violence. Balibar argues that there is no such thing as non-violence whilst linking the notion of borders to violence: '[...] social and territorial borders are privileged places where codified violence borders on cruelty.'⁴ For Balibar, nation-state borders are 'projections of the world disorder' where 'violence [...] concentrates on their more or less stable lines.'⁵

There are so many ideas and theories about the way violence should be understood. To start, my interpretation of violence is not synonymous with physical

² Ursula Biemann, 'Interview with Bertha Jottar,' in *Been There and Back to Nowhere: Gender in Transnational Spaces*, ed. Stephan Geene (Berlin and Brooklyn: B_Books, 2000), p.167.

³ William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization (Borderlines)*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. xxiii.

⁴ Étienne Balibar, 'Violence, Ideality and Cruelty,' in *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans. Christine Jones, James Swenson and Chris Turner (London and New York: 2002), p.138.

⁵ Étienne Balibar, 'Preface,' in *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans. Christine Jones, James Swenson and Chris Turner (London and New York: 2002), p.xi.

force or assault on another body, although it can and often does result in it. In terms of representation, it does not simply equate to images of bloodshed and war although again, it is more often than not a consequence of it. My take on violence will traverse a wide and varied conceptual territory. Indeed, many thinkers have theorised and developed taxonomies of violence ranging from Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Žižek, amongst many others. Although I make reference to a number of these theorists, I do not adhere to a single account. My decision for taking into consideration a vast array of theories in relation to violence is not only because of violence's ambiguity but also due to the pervasiveness and elusiveness of borders themselves. As political geographer Edward Soja has poetically maintained:

We live enmeshed in thick webs of borders and boundaries. Most are out of sight and conscious awareness, yet they all impinge in some way on our lives as internal parts of our real and imagined geographies and biographies. Some carry with them the hard and invasive powers of the state, others the manipulative magic of market forces, still others the softer limits of identity and community, desire and imagination. Borders and boundaries are life's linear regulators, framing our thoughts and practices into territories of action that range in scale and scope [...]⁶

Although my focus is on nation-state borders, I will also emphasise how its rippling effects are felt at the level of 'identity and community' diving in and out of 'conscious awareness.' There is a symbiotic relationship between borders and violence and therefore, like Soja's description of borders, I will also treat violence as elusive and as surfacing in unexpected places. Violence is structural and spontaneous, manifesting itself in psychological, physical, systemic and symbolic ways. Violence is interpersonal, collective, social and spatial. It is often spectacularly visible and sometimes hidden from sight. However often and vehemently it is condemned and fought, it is everywhere to be found.

⁶ Edward W. Soja, 'Borders Unbound: Globalization, Regionalism, and Postmetropolitan Transition,' in *B/ordering Space*, ed. Henk van Houtum, Olivier Kramsch and Wolfgang Zierhofer (Hants and Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), p.33.

More specifically, what I wish to do with the concept of violence is to understand the socio-political fabric of the Mexico-U.S. border and unpack why it is so often discussed and framed in violent terms. For this reason, all of the chapters of *Geographies of Violence* are framed by the concept of violence. In a way that reflects violence's pervasiveness, each chapter starts with a reflection on a particular take on violence, from a wide array of thinkers ranging from Derrida to Žižek. My reflections on violence are located at the crossroads of geography, space and violence. Questions that inform and drive my approach include: can placing violence in a cultural and aesthetic context reveal something about the mechanisms of violence in lived subjective reality and in its social and political registers? Can art critically think through some of the reasons behind the violence that frames the Mexico-U.S. borderlands and the construction, enforcement and the representation of space and territory? More idealistically perhaps, can the affective power of art effectively nurture empathy and even propose strategies for ameliorating and revamping these geographies of violence?

My theoretical framework rests on, as well as modifies and expands the genealogy and theorisations examining site-oriented practices especially as put forward by art historian Miwon Kwon in her book *One Place After Another* (2002). Additionally, I will extensively engage with the writings of art historian James Meyer in 'The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity' (1996) as well as Hal Foster's 'The Artist as Ethnographer' (1995). Although site-specificity has undergone many permutations, spatiality has remained its conceptual point of departure. Site-specificity's theoretical framework is useful in a dissertation concerned with artistic practices that focus on the spatial-politics of the Mexico-U.S. border. Kwon has claimed that:

[...]site-specific art was initially based in a phenomenological or experiential understanding of site, defined primarily as an agglomeration of the actual physical attributes of a particular location [...] then, through the materialist investigations of institutional critique, the site was

reconfigured as a relay or network of interrelated spaces and economies [...] which together frame and sustain art's ideological system.⁷

In all of the chapters, I will place the artwork in question within my own genealogy of site-specificity. The history of institutional critique will also play an important role since the artists that I engage with launched a critique on the larger institution of the nation-state. I will argue that the theoretical framework of site-oriented practices has a more expansive reach than has so far been acknowledged. Due to the fact that Gómez-Peña, Biemann, Akerman and Margolles adopt an ethnographic approach by, for instance, using the participant observation method, I will also draw extensively on Foster's 'The Artist as Ethnographer' where he discusses 'the ethnographic turn' in relation to site-oriented practices. According to Foster, in recent artistic practices, an '[...] ethnographic envy consumes many artists and critics.'⁸ Foster links the development of an ethnographic sensibility to site-specific art maintaining that 'the ethnographic turn':

[...] constitute[s] a series of shifts in the *siting* of art: from the surface of the medium to the space of the museum, from institutional frames to discursive networks, to the point where many artists and critics treat conditions like desire or disease, AIDS or homelessness, as sites for art.⁹

I will claim that Foster's essay charts a useful genealogy of site-specificity and rightly and crucially points to some of the pitfalls of work that engages with identity and difference, which I will be mindful of throughout this dissertation. At the same time, however, I will also maintain that his tone is often unfairly critical—even dismissive—of works that engage with a politics of alterity revealing his own yearning for an art hermetically sealed from interdisciplinary dialogue.

Instead, my own approach capitalises on exchanges between disciplines since I think they enrich and expand art historical research and dialogue and are more suited

⁷ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 3.

⁸ Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 181

⁹ Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer', p. 184

to capture the complexities of contemporary politically motivated art practices. Such cross-disciplinary incursions are also better equipped to analyse the intricate web of historical, political, theoretical and cultural conditions that characterise nation-state borders.¹⁰

This dissertation is composed of a series of case studies of artists engaging with Mexico-U.S. border, works from the mid-1980s to the present day. The works that I consider span a thirty-year period and range from performance art, video-essays and installations. Through an expanded and modified framework of site-oriented practices that I will discuss in more detail below, the opening chapter examines the performance *The End of the Line* (1986) by the San Diego- Tijuana based artistic collective Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF). I will draw attention to the way in which the members of this collective proposed an innovative geography free from the shackles of violent neo-colonialist cartographies as well as historical narratives. In the second chapter I will turn to the Guillermo Gómez-Peña's performances and the way in which he treats the border as a spatial trope that informs a myriad of relationships and enables the exclusory and divisive formation of collective identities. In the third chapter, I will analyse the video-essay *Performing the Border* (1999) by artist Ursula Biemann that examines the living and working condition of female sweatshop workers in northern Mexican city of Ciudad Juárez paying attention to the strategies she employs in order to shine a spotlight on the systemic violence perpetrated by the abstract forces of capital and enabled by poor urban infrastructure. Examining Chantal Akerman's film *From the Other Side* (2002), in the fourth chapter, I will concentrate on the violence inherent in the appropriation of territory and the creation of the nation-state. Focusing on the attention that Akerman pays to landscape, I will explore how the physicality of landscape and its

¹⁰ In fact, this methodology is in line with the way borders have been theorised and analysed. According to geographer Vladimir Kolossov, for instance, 'border studies'—sometimes called limology—have become an interdisciplinary subject that has caught the attention of geographers, political scientists, legal scholars, economists, psychologists, and sociologists. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the reorganisation of borders during the 1990s, particularly in Eastern Europe, all contributed to the development of 'border studies.'

[Vladimir Kolossov, 'Border Studies; Changing Perspectives and Theoretical Approaches,' *Geopolitics* 10 (2005): 606].

ideologically inscribed representations are saturated with violence that aids the solidification and legitimisation of the nation-state. For the fifth and final chapter, I look at the recent work of Mexican artist Teresa Margolles who makes eerie installations out of, amongst others, the actual blood of ‘drug war’ victims and the water used to bathe corpses at the morgue. Here, I concentrate more on the more visible forms of violence that have gripped Mexico since the advent of the so-called ‘drug war’ in 2006.

Throughout this dissertation I examine ways of representing this border zone that reveal and critically examine the often labyrinthian set of economic, political and even personal relations that sometimes elude normative forms of popular representation. In my view, each of these artists critically engages with a set of relations that often navigate invisibly, and yet are the very reasons behind the violence—poetically articulated in Anzaldúa’s and Jottar’s claims—that marks the border. It may be true that the artists that I engage with adopt very diverse strategies across a variety of mediums: installation, performance and video art. But by placing their work within a genealogy of site-specificity—one that is based on previous models but that I expand and modify—and underlining that they all engage with spatial politics and oppressive cartographies, I will also show how their practices intersect in ways that not only reveal the potential of site-specificity as a methodological framework but also help unravel the myriad of complexities that characterise the Mexico-U.S. borders.

In this introduction, I will start by giving a detailed overview of the literature that has surrounded the artistic production of the Mexico-U.S. border in order to both situate and distinguish my project within the already existing literature. In the next section, I will discuss how nation-state borders have been theorised in academic literature since the 1980s. Here I will historicise and contextualise the so-called ‘border studies’ taking into account the ontology of borders, postmodernist theories, postcolonialism and, more generally, the history of economic globalisation. In this section I will explain the chosen time span of my dissertation maintaining, broadly, that nation-state borders became a prominent object of study during the 1980s. Following this, I will examine issues of spectacle in relation to the Mexico-U.S. border.

Finally, I will extensively lay out the methodology of this dissertation by examining the theoretical framework of site-specificity and outline the way in which it is woven throughout *Geographies of Violence*.

A 'Border Art' History? Counter-narratives of Globalisation

The first artists to take the Mexico-U.S. border as their main subject are those roughly classified under the umbrella of the Chicano Art Movement that operated from the late 1960s to the end of the 1970s, inextricably linked to the Chicano Civil Right's Movement. As I will explore in more detail in Chapter One, many of those artists expressed a yearning for their mythical homeland of Aztlán—located in the Southwest of the U.S.—that, they maintained, had been forcibly taken away from them by European settlers. Sometimes with nationalistic undertones, they often worked with Aztec imagery and painted large murals in various communities mostly in Southern California.¹¹

Following some of the ideas of the Chicano movement, the BAW/TAF was also struggling against what they perceived to be pervasive racism but, unlike their predecessors, steered away from the mythical allure of Aztlán. Instead, from a more transnational perspective, they paid closer attention to issues of immigration and the problems arising from the Mexico-U.S. border itself. In fact, this is why I have chosen to start with the BAW/TAF's artistic practices for they were preoccupied with the politics of transnationality unlike their forerunners. More recently, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, Gómez-Peña, a member of the BAW/TAF who went on to pursue his own separate career, continued many of the projects of this collective and engaged with postmodernist theories, the politics of multiculturalism and identity

¹¹ Allan W. Moore, 'Artists' Collectives: Focus on New York, 1975-2000,' in *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*, ed. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p.195.

politics. In his own words, he investigated what was happening '[...]to Latin American culture when it crosses the border, how the U.S. creates simulacra of authenticity.'¹²

Since the early 1990s, InSite, a biennial located in both San Diego and Tijuana, showcased work specifically commissioned for this event by a number of acclaimed artists including Vito Acconci, Alfredo Jaar, Andrea Fraser, Mark Dion, Krzysztof Wodiczko and Antoni Muntadas.¹³ Funded by both governmental and corporate bodies, InSite first took place in 1992 and finished in 2005.¹⁴ The advent of InSite roughly coincided with one of the most important political events of the time span of this dissertation which was the emergence of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), signed into effect in 1994, that allowed the free flow of goods between Canada, the U.S. and Mexico, but did nothing to ease the transit of people.

Indeed, discussions surrounding border art culture of the last couple of decades place NAFTA at the centre stage of their argument. Such is the case with comparative literature professor Claire F. Fox, in her 1999 book *The Fence and the River: Culture and Politics at the U.S.-Mexico Border*, that focuses on the visual representation of the Mexico-U.S. border. She does not historicise the development of 'border art' and instead looks at the cultural production of the region through the lens of the development of neoliberalism and the signing of NAFTA. Fox claimed that during the 1980s and 1990s the border received unprecedented attention from the artistic community due to various reasons: the signing of NAFTA; debates and responses surrounding the fashionable notion of post-nationalism; and the escalating urban development of 'transfrontier' twin cities such as San Diego/ Tijuana and El Paso/Ciudad Juárez that received large amounts of media attention after the implementation of NAFTA.¹⁵ It was during the 1980s and 1990s that U.S. universities

¹² Guillermo Gómez-Peña, 'Guillermo Gómez-Peña interviewed by Mildred Thomson,' in *Interventions and Provocations: Conversations on Art, Culture, and Resistance*, ed. Glenn Harper (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 5.

¹³ George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 289.

¹⁴ For a different history of the artistic projects that have taken place in the Mexico-U.S. border see Jo-Anne Berelowitz, 'The Space of Home In Chicano and Latino Representations of the San Diego-Tijuana Borderlands (1968-2002),' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23 (2005):

¹⁵ Claire F. Fox, *The Fence and the River: Culture and Politics at the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp.1-2

and colleges—especially those located close to the border—began to offer courses that concentrated on the relationship between Mexico and the U.S., as part of other debates linked to the economic, political and cultural ramifications of globalisation.¹⁶ Another reason for the increased attention paid to borders is that, during Reagan's administration, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) strongly expanded, partly as a response to Mexico's economic downturn of 1982 which caused a sharp rise in immigration into the U.S.¹⁷ This was also the time when the trope of an uncontrollable 'flood of immigration' that threatened the coherence of the nation-state became conspicuous in debates surrounding the Mexico-U.S. border.¹⁸

Fox rightly argues that '[...] the border as it appears in literature and art must be understood as polyvalent, as a place where urban and rural, national and international spaces simultaneously coexist, often in complex and contradictory ways.'¹⁹ Covering works of literature, film and visual arts, Fox's book was written in the late 1990s. She shows how NAFTA altered the relationship between cultural activities and the Mexican state. Neoliberal economic policies implemented since the 1980s helped to undo the Mexican government's grip on artistic production including film, newspapers, and publishing.²⁰ In line with Fox's views, Latin American literature professor Jean Franco, discussing representation in relation to the Mexican government's decision to join NAFTA, argued that 'The new Mexican state represents itself as a break with the past' adding that '[...] privatisation is an ideology and a system of representation as well as effecting changes in every day life.'²¹

Many other academics have pointed to the cultural and political effects of NAFTA outside of its economic impact. For instance, underscoring the importance of NAFTA

¹⁶ Tirza True Latimer, 'Art on the Borderline,' in *The Impact of Globalization on the United States: Culture and Society*, ed. Michelle Bertho (Westport and London: Praeger Perspectives, 2008), p. 164.

¹⁷ Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on 'Illegals' and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), p. 84.

David E. Simcox, 'Introduction,' in *U.S. Immigration in the 1980s*, ed. David E. Simcox (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1988), p. 23.

¹⁸ Camilla Fojas, *Border Bandits: Hollywood on the Southern Frontier* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), p. 88.

¹⁹ Fox, *The Fence and the River*, p. 3.

²⁰ Fox, *The Fence and the River*, p. 16.

²¹ Jean Franco, "'Manhattan Will Be More Exotic This Fall': The Iconisation of Frida Kahlo,' *Women: A Cultural Review* 2.3 (1991): 221.

in binational relations, Nobel Prize economist and New York Times columnist Paul Krugman claimed that NAFTA benefitted the U.S. more in terms of foreign policy than in economic terms.²² Krugman adds '[...] NAFTA's economic benefit to the United States [and México], while real, will be small [...].'²³ Discussing the impact NAFTA had on binational relationships, political scientist María Lorena Cook argued that Mexico, with the signing of NAFTA, exhibited a new willingness to engage with other cultures that contrasted strongly with its previous protectionist policies and its wariness of foreign intervention and influence. Unlike other Latin American countries, Cook maintains that Mexico—despite its economic dependency on the United States—had held on strongly to notions of national sovereignty until the advent of NAFTA, which gave formal recognition to the economic and cultural exchanges that had been taking place already. For Cook, NAFTA '[...] redraws the geographical boundary around three nation states.'²⁴

Although I discuss NAFTA extensively—especially in relation to Gómez-Peña and Biemann's work, both of which are driven by a wish to critique neoliberalism's mechanisms—my dissertation, unlike Fox's book, is not centred on its impact. My concern with site-specificity and, more broadly, the way in which artists have engaged with space and its ideological underpinnings take precedence in *Geographies of Violence* over NAFTA's effects.

More recently than Fox, in his 2003 book *The Expediency of Culture*, professor of Latin American studies George Yúdice discusses InSite through the lens of Allan Sekula's work *Dead Letter Office* that was showcased for InSite 97. For this installation, Sekula juxtaposed photos of the border patrol and wealthy Republicans

²² Paul Krugman, *Pop Internationalism* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 157.

²³ Krugman, *Pop Internationalism*, pp.163-165.

²⁴ María Lorena Cook, 'Regional Integration and Transnational Politics: Popular Sector Strategies in the NAFTA Era,' in *The New Politics of Inequality in Latin America: Rethinking Participation and Representation*, ed. Douglas A. Chalmers, Carlos M. Vilas, Katherine Hite, Scott B. Martin, Kerianne Piester and Monique Segarro, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.523.

Arguably, however, Mexico's willingness to loosen its grip on protectionist policies came much earlier. In fact, Mexico had announced in late 1985 that it was joining the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), now known as the World Trade Organization (WTO). For more information see Robert A. Pastor, 'Sliding Toward Economic Integration: *The U.S. Perspective*,' in *Limits to Friendship: The United States and Mexico*, ed. Robert A. Pastor and Jorge G. Castañeda (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), pp. 195-216.

residing in San Diego with images of poverty on the Tijuana side (**Plates 0.1 and 0.2**). He also documents, in the words of Yúdice, the ‘encroachment of the culture industry,’ by photographing and unpacking Twentieth Century Fox set constructed for the filming of the 1998 blockbuster film *Titanic* in the economically deprived Mexican border town of Popotla.²⁵ Discussing this project, Sekula claimed:

Seeking to profit from lower Mexican wages, Twentieth Century Fox built the set next to the poor fishing village of Popotla [...] 40 miles south of the US border [...] The production facility featured the largest freshwater filming tank in the world [...] The neighboring village, just to the south of the walls and guard towers of the set [...] has no running water [...] Efflux from the filming tanks lowered the salinity of the coastal tide pools, damaging the traditional mussel-gathering livelihood of the villagers.²⁶

Yúdice further argues that Sekula draws a parallel between the movie set in Popotla—that can be conceived, he argues, as ‘[...] an artistic maquiladora’²⁷—with the exhibition space of InSite. According to Yúdice, with Mexico’s emerging neoliberalist agenda, new curatorial practices emerged that embraced corporate sponsorship and transnational cooperation. In this way, InSite—both publicly and privately funded—could be read as a form of cultural brokering that attempted to strengthen and nurture ties in the cultural domain and parallel the economic allegiance that was being forged at a time when NAFTA was being drafted and subsequently implemented.²⁸ Yúdice continues: ‘conceived when negotiations were about to culminate in the signing of NAFTA, InSite directors contributed to crafting a new binational model of cooperation and resource sharing that was as much cultural as economic.’²⁹

Yúdice was right when he pointed out that InSite fostered binational relationships in a way that supported NAFTA’s agenda. This is why I largely steer

²⁵ Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture*, pp. 287-289.

²⁶ Allan Sekula, ‘Between the Net and the Deep Blue Sea (Rethinking the Traffic in Photographs),’ in *Visual Worlds*, ed. John R. Hall, Blake Stimson and Lisa Tamiris Becker (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 179.

²⁷ Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture*, p. 287.

²⁸ Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture*, p. 308.

²⁹ Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture*, p. 309.

away from projects commissioned specifically for InSite that also sometimes uncritically engage with the spectacular politics that often frame the region. At the same time, however, I also think it is also important not to lose sight of some of the productive lines of inquiry opened up by works exhibited at InSite, like Sekula's, that critically analysed the political and economic relations between Mexico and the U.S.

Rather than analysing the history of 'border art' or biennial politics like Yúdice, I focus on the politics of representation in relation to site-specificity and the intersection between art and politics. Art critics such as Jill Bennett have articulated this intersection, pointing out recently that by reconfiguring aesthetics '[...]' as the site for the systemic ordering of sense experience' we can:

[...] Conceive on an aesthetics informed by and derived from practical, real-world encounters, an aesthetics that is in turn capable of being used or put into effect in a real situation [...] It is to orient aesthetics—with its specific qualities and capacities—towards actual events or problems [...] Art figures as an aesthetic operation [...] that takes as its subject matter the already aesthetic nature of everyday perception.³⁰

My dissertation is composed of 'real-world' encounters that help to unravel the complexity of such 'actual events.' As art critic Brian Holmes vividly claims, we have to acknowledge that 'art history has emerged into the present, and the critique of the conditions of representation has spilled out onto the streets.'³¹

My approach has been heavily influenced and made possible by the contemporary focus on the intersection between art and politics of the kind Bennett voices. She looks at this intersection through the lens of economic globalisation and has taken inspiration particularly from the writings of Jacques Rancière. This French philosopher's theories have informed the work of, for instance, art historian Claire Bishops who, in her book *Artificial Hells* of 2012, claims that his writings '[...]' rehabilitated the idea of aesthetics and connected it to politics as an integrally related

³⁰ Jill Bennett, *Practical Aesthetics: Events, Affects and Art after 9/11* (London and New York: I.B Tauris, 2012), pp. 2-3.

³¹ Brian Holmes, 'Extradisciplinary Investigations: Towards a New Critique of Institutions,' *Transversal*, January 2007. Date accessed: 16th of July 2013. <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/holmes/en>

domain.’³² Rancière defines aesthetics as a ‘[...] a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience.’³³ Claiming that aesthetics is a political mode, Rancière imbricates politics and aesthetics arguing that it organises our everyday realities and determines what can be said and thought at a given place and time. For him ‘Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct “fictions,” that is to say *material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done.’³⁴ Discussing the imbrication of aesthetics and politics in Rancière writings art historian T.J. Demos, in his recently published book *The Migrant Image*, explains that in the philosopher’s writings ‘[...] aesthetics [...] defines the force of the political in art which is capable of proposing alternatives to conventional politics from outside the system.’³⁵

As art historian Grant H. Kester points out, the writings of Rancière, as well as those of Giorgio Agamben, have been pervasive in both academia and the art world.³⁶ For instance, in his aforementioned book, Demos seeks to examine how contemporary art ‘[...]explores the current situation in which multitudes are reduced to the status of what Giorgio Agamben terms *bare life*—that is, life stripped of political identity and exposed to the state’s unmediated application of power.’³⁷ It is this political bent, informed and shaped by the theories of Rancière and Agamben and, subsequently, creatively analysed by art historians such as Bishop and Demos in relation to contemporary art that has influenced the approach of my dissertation. This new way of thinking about the relationship between art and politics can lead to a productive body of works—and a productive readings of them— that are not held back by the traditional and restrictive division between aesthetics and politics.

³² Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), p. 18.

³³ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 13.

³⁴ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p.39.

³⁵ T. J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), p.28.

³⁶ Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art and the Many in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p.54.

³⁷ Demos, *The Migrant Image*, p.xiv.

A Line in the Sand? Redefining the Borders of the Nation-State

How to critically engage with a national border as a theoretical and representational subject? In the face of ubiquitous and spectacular media representations, how do we represent and analyse the complex flow of people and capital that characterises the Mexico-U.S. borderlands without surrendering criticality? Indeed, how do we even begin to define a national border? According to Balibar in his essay 'What is a Border?' attempting to define a border is a tautological project. 'To define,' Balibar claims '[...] is nothing other than to trace a border, to assign boundaries.'³⁸ For Balibar, borders by definition define, encircle, delineate and confer signification and in doing so, always dilute complexity.³⁹ He claims that the nation-state itself is a '[...]formidable reducer of complexities.'⁴⁰ Yet, as he points out, every examination of borders involves a discussion on identities whether individual, collective or national. For Balibar, borders '[...] hypothetical or fictive nature, do not make them any less real.'⁴¹ In what follows, I will give a literature review of how the meaning of borders have shifted, developed and grown over the last few decades in a way that highlights how they 'confer signification' and 'dilute complexity'. Amongst others, this will help historicise, explain and expand on the claims that I made earlier that space and nation-state borders are far from neutral but rather ideologically inscribed. To conclude, I will claim how one of my aims is to critique the neoconservative belief that we live in an increasingly 'borderless world.'

The notion of space as relational—constituted through a series of processes, movements and interactions—that I embrace throughout, owes a debt to the work carried out by geographers and theorists active since the 1980s that have reconfigured the way we think about space. Importantly, French theorist Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) argued that '*space is a practiced*

³⁸ Étienne Balibar, 'What is a Border?', in *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans. Christine Jones, James Swenson and Chris Turner (London and New York: 2002), p. 76.

³⁹ Balibar, 'What is a Border?', p. 76.

⁴⁰ Balibar, 'What is a Border?', p. 76.

⁴¹ Balibar, 'What is a Border?', p. 76.

place.’⁴² In a similar vein, geographer Doreen Massey, a leading theorist of the so-called ‘spatial turn’ that emerged during the 1980s, argued, broadly that space was socially constructed, produced and power laden.⁴³ In her seminal book *Space, Place and Gender* (1994) she defined space as ‘unfixed, contested and multiple.’⁴⁴ Soja, in 1989, also problematized dominant notions of space claiming:

We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies are filled with politics and ideology.⁴⁵

These theorists rightly considered space as no longer reduced to neutral Euclidean coordinates painted in a background, stripped from ideological underpinnings.

Turning to nation-state borders, for geographer David Newman, concomitant with the advent of postmodernist theories, there was a change in the study of borders: whereas previous academics unproblematically considered borders as ‘rigid’ and two-dimensional inscriptions on a map, or as ‘lines in the sand,’ nowadays borders are, as in Balibar’s statement, conceptualised as ‘flexible[...] reflecting new territorial and spatial pattern of human behavior.’⁴⁶ The role of institutions has also been more amply considered, to the extent that they determine the way borders are constructed, enforced and patrolled. The notion that borders are natural boundaries has rightly now become outmoded.⁴⁷ For Newman, ‘It is the process of bordering, rather than the border line per se, that has universal significance in the ordering of society.’⁴⁸

Underlining the role of capitalism in the representation and construction of borders, sociologist Michael Keith and geographer Steve Pile maintain that ‘Capitalism

⁴² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1984), p. 117.

⁴³ Henk van Houtum, Olivier Kramsch and Wolfgang Zierhofer, ‘B/ordering Space,’ in *B/ordering Space*, ed. Henk van Houtum, Olivier Kramsch and Wolfgang Zierhofer (Hants and Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), p.4.

⁴⁴ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 5.

⁴⁵ Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London and New York: Verso 1989) p.25.

⁴⁶ David Newman, ‘On Borders and Power: A Theoretical Framework,’ *Journal of Borderland Studies* 18 (2003): 13.

⁴⁷ Newman, ‘On Borders and Power,’ p.14.

⁴⁸ Newman, ‘On Borders and Power,’ p.16.

organized, and was organized, by a geometrical view of space.⁴⁹ Other academics and artists have usefully proposed thinking about the border in terms of performativity in order to move away from dominant geometrical models. For instance Biemann, whose work I analyse in the third chapter, has also claimed that:

The idea that borders are socially formed and performed is not only inspiring, it truly enhances the agency of artists, writers and video makers since it highlights their involvement in the symbolic production as a performative act of doing border,” if we wish to adapt Judith Butler’s notion of ‘doing gender’ to this geographic act.⁵⁰

The meaning of borders—as Balibar’s, Newman’s and Biemann’s remarks reveal—has undergone a radical transformation, leading to productive models for understanding space and its geographical representations, materialised in works such as Biemann’s video essay *Performing the Border*.

The way in which I discuss nation-state borders and space owes a debt to these writings. Indeed, throughout *Geographies of Violence*, I will be particularly concerned with the way in which artists have attempted to dismantle established notions of borders and rigid geometrical views of space. Like Biemann, I also think that a more expansive way of conceiving of borders and space enhances the ‘agency of artists.’ Since our understanding of geopolitical space is tied to representations of it—more commonly through cartographic inscriptions that result in maps—artistic practices, by disassembling and revamping current geopolitical paradigms, can offer innovative and less oppressive spatial imaginaries.

Accompanying the spatial debates I have just outlined, during the 1980s and 1990s, there was also a general questioning on the part of academics of nationhood. Most notably, this concern was catalysed by international studies professor Benedict Anderson’s seminal book *Imagined Communities* (1983). Here he made the now famous claim that a nation is ‘[...] an imagined political community [...] *Imagined*

⁴⁹ Michael Keith and Steve Pile, ‘Introduction Part 1: The Politics of Place,’ in *Place and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Michael Keith and Steve Pile (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p.2.

⁵⁰ Ursula Biemann, ‘Performing Borders: The Transnational Video,’ in *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age*, ed. Ursula Biemann (Zürich and New York: Springer Wien, 2003), p.89.

because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members [...] yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.’⁵¹ I will reintroduce Anderson’s crucial argument that the ‘nation-state is imagined’ at several strategic junctures in this dissertation since many of the artists that I will be engaging with point to the artificiality of both borders and the category of the nation-state. Indeed, as I will reiterate throughout, one of my aims and those of the artists that I discuss is to dismantle hermetic notions of the nation-state and discard the notion that nation-state borders are determined by natural or pre-existing boundaries.

As well as questioning the coherence of the nation-state, another of my aims and those of the artists that I discuss is to foreground how, despite the prevalence of triumphalist renderings of globalisation, borders are still crucial components of today’s geopolitical configuration. It is perhaps no surprise that some neoconservative critics, especially during the 1980s and 1990s, triumphantly pointed to the dissolution of borders. For instance, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, in his well-known book *The World is Flat* (2005), argued that the expanding interconnectedness of the globe, together with the increasing sophistication of information technologies, have rapidly created a ‘small’ or ‘flat’ world.⁵² To be sure, the increased mobility of capital, goods and labour; the global networks of communication and information technologies; the emergence of transnational political and economic networks, have all contributed to such views. Additionally, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the seeming dissolution of borders within the European Union and, importantly for Mexico, the signing of NAFTA in 1994, have fed into the growing notion of a unified world during the last decade of the 20th century.⁵³

⁵¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 6.

⁵² For more information see Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: The Globalized World in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

⁵³ Eiki Berg and Henk van Houtum, ‘Prologue: A Border is Not a Border. Writing and Reading Borders in Space,’ in *Routing Borders Between Territories, Discourses and Practices*, ed. Eiki Berg and Henk van Houtum (Hants and Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), p. 1.

However, myopic views such as Friedman's overlook and disregard those who are at the bottom of global capitalism's ruthless hierarchy. As Balibar has rightly argued:

[...] Borders [...] do not have the same meaning for everyone [...] Nothing is less like a material thing than a border, even though it is officially "the same" (identical to itself, and therefore well defined) whichever way you cross it—whether you do so as a businessman or an academic travelling to a conference, or as a young unemployed person. Today's borders [...] are, to some extent, designed to perform precisely this task: not merely to give individuals from different social classes different experiences of the law, administration, police [...] but actively differentiate between individuals of social class.⁵⁴

As Balibar's claim implies, if the world is flat, it is certainly not flat for everyone. Throughout this dissertation I will discuss aesthetic strategies that underline these uneven geographies and the way in which today's nation-state borders accelerate the movement of capital whilst filtering, excluding and perpetrating violence on the bodies of low-skilled labourers, undocumented migrants and victims of violent crime. Indeed, as I will expand in relation to Biemann's work, the hypermobility of capital comes at the expense of the stilling and restraint of low-skilled labourers.

At a time of transnational global capital, mass migrations and increasingly sophisticated communication technologies—all of which have informed and been informed by debates surrounding 'post-nationalism' and, more broadly 'globalisation'—it might seem 'out of place' to frame a study in a particular geographical location. Whilst it is true that questions surrounding the nation-state, nationalism and sovereignty are undergoing radical transformation, the seemingly anachronistic category of the nation-state is still a crucial component of our contemporary understandings of the world and its configuration,

⁵⁴ Balibar, 'What is a Border?', pp. 81-82.

Warped Representations: Surveillance and Spectacle at the Border

In this section, I want to analyse how the politics of spectacle unfortunately dominates and determines much of the discussion surrounding the Mexico-U.S. border. Since my project is driven by a desire to find ways of critically understanding the complex and warped representations that often frame the border, it is important to outline the detrimental ways in which it is framed. As I will argue in the following section, many of the site-specific artwork made at the Mexico-U.S. border—especially that commissioned by InSite—risks participating rather than critically engaging with such warped representations.

Jottar, who collaborated with both the BAW/TAF and Biemann, pointed out has aptly described one of the ways in which the border is rendered as a war zone and framed in spectacular terms:

[...] The U.S. is always at war against somebody, so when there is no international war going on, they use the border because that's their "natural" place to rehearse or have a little war. When the Gulf War was over, former President Bush announced nationally that his next war was against drugs. Guess where! [...] I'm quite interested in the idea of recycling and the border is a good storage place for recycling [...] For the U.S. the border is a recycling territory where it can practice and rehearse its war mentality. The [...] U.S. State culture is articulated through masculinized, high-tech war games performed at the border [...] It embodies the idea of a combat zone [...] This representation is so violent[...].⁵⁵

As a matter of fact, with the U.S.'s recent and gradual withdrawal of its troops in both Iraq and Afghanistan, military contractors—facing substantial federal budget cuts—have turned their attention away from the Middle East and into the Mexico-U.S. border, attempting to benefit from tighter security measures and immigration laws.⁵⁶ It may even be that the causality goes the other way around, and that the new

⁵⁵ Ursula Biemann, 'Interview with Bertha Jottar,' p.167.

⁵⁶ Eric Lipton, 'As Wars End, a Rush to Grab Dollars Spent on the Border,' *The New York Times*, June 6th, 2013. Date accessed: June 7th, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/07/us/us-military-firms-eye-border-security-contracts.html?nl=todaysheadlines&emc=edit_th_20130607&r=0

stringent border policy is a consequence of the military contractors looking for new markets, now that the demand created by the 'war against terror' is waning. It is also telling that when the physical fence that separates Mexico from the U.S. was first built in San Diego in 1990, it was constructed from the discarded air force landing mats from the war in Vietnam.⁵⁷ According to political scientist Wendy Brown not only are neoliberalism and political violence inextricably linked, but the 'dimension of security' in border politics—that Jottar also eloquently articulates—has a crucial role to play in this linkage.⁵⁸

This 'dimension of security' has become a spectacle where the nation-state is enforced and performed. My examination of the work of the BAW/TAF, Gómez-Peña, Biemann and Akerman will show how these artists attempted to foreground the arbitrariness of borders and dismantle the legitimacy of territory that the U.S. government spectacularly reinforces and stages at the border in the way that Jottar describes. Indeed, security system at the border are implemented not only for practical reasons but, perhaps more so, to enforce notions of national sovereignty. A good example is 'Operation Gatekeeper' launched in 1994 by then president Bill Clinton, which I will discuss in more detail in relation to Akerman's work. This operation included additional technologies of fortification to the western part of the border (namely California) and, although it did decrease smuggling and crossings in that area, much of it just moved eastward and resulted in an increase rate of migrant deaths.⁵⁹ Geographer Joseph Nevins claimed that this project was in great measure '[...] a political sideshow designed for public consumption to demonstrate the Clinton administration's seriousness about cracking down immigration [... The] U.S. Mexico boundary became a stage with a national audience.'⁶⁰

In agreement with Nevins, international relations expert Anne McNevin contends that border controls are often enforced in order to 'restore the legitimacy of

⁵⁷ Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zoe Books, 2010), p.35.

⁵⁸ Brown, *Walled States*, p.97.

⁵⁹ Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on 'Illegals' and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), pp.35-37.

⁶⁰ Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper*, p.114.

globalizing states in territorial terms.’⁶¹ She further argues that the lack of efficacy of contemporary border policing not only ensures that there is a constant supply of cheap labour whilst ‘each act of interdiction, arrest, incarceration [...] helps to re-establish the meaningfulness of territory [...] and] to reinforce the naturalness of the citizen-state-territory constellation.’⁶² Similarly, according to Brown, rather than an efficient method of deterrence, the building of walls in places such as the Mexico-U.S. border is a direct response to an erosion of sovereignty, whilst the multi billion expenditure in infrastructures, escalating year after year, is in essence a means of theatricalizing sovereignty.⁶³ Political scientist Peter Andreas, author of *Border Games*, also rightly holds that the advocates of tighter border security are driven not so much by a desire to stop the flow of illegal migrants but by the need to play a ‘ritualistic performance,’ one that is put on by ‘performers’ who attempt to ‘save face by promising a bigger and better show,’ replacing images of chaos and mayhem with ‘comforting images of order,’ in the form of state of the art walling systems.⁶⁴

As such, border policing performs two functions that are seemingly paradoxical but yet coexist: it allows the influx of cheap labour whilst it maintains an image of the border as a militarised and highly regulated zone in order to court anti-immigration sentiments. McNevin correctly claims that the policing of the Mexico-U.S. border has been extraordinarily unsuccessful in stopping immigrants from entering the U.S. but that it has been very successful in providing an ‘image of control.’⁶⁵ Perhaps the work that I discuss that most actively and visibly attempted to shatter this image of control is *The End of the Line* since the BAW/TAF members effectively staged a carnival at the Mexico U.S. border whilst crossing it illegally and wearing exaggerated foam costumes.

Unfortunately, border policing and the theatricalization of sovereignty has had dire consequences. Gómez-Peña, as I will examine in the second chapter, unpacks the

⁶¹ Anne McNevin, *Contesting Citizenship: Irregular Migrants and New Frontiers of the Political* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p.58.

⁶² McNevin, *Contesting Citizenship*, p.59.

⁶³ Brown, *Walled States*, pp.90-91.

⁶⁴ Peter Andreas, *Border Games: Policing the U.S. Mexico Divide* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), 144.

⁶⁵ McNevin, *Contesting Citizenship*, p.59.

psychological consequences U.S. government's persecutory ethos in relation to illegal migrants. In addition, border rights activist Maria Jimenez asserts that the increased amount of security does not only fail to materially deter border crossers but has troubling consequences, in that it fuels illegal economies—people are more likely to contact human smugglers or 'coyotes', as they are commonly called, or attempt to purchase forged documents—as well as legal industries such as private security contractors.⁶⁶ To Jimenez's claim I would add another (in my view more urgent) consequence of such measures that I will examine in relation to Akerman's work: migrants are often forced to adopt more dangerous routes that sometimes cost them their lives.

The 'cat and mouse game' that takes place at the border and Akerman documents in *From the Other Side* resembles some of the features of spectator sport. Andreas contends that '[...] border policing has some of the features of ritualized spectator sport, but in this case the objective of the game is to tame rather than to inflame the passions of the spectators.'⁶⁷ A good example of the useful spectator sports metaphor that Andreas employs—which I will return to at certain points throughout this dissertation—is the fact that ordinary citizens, as far back as the late 1980s, have joined the efforts of the Border Patrol in spotting illegal immigrants, as if they were joining a sports team. In *From the Other Side*, Akerman documents this vigilantism that often takes place in the town of Douglas, Arizona by, amongst others, interviewing watchmen. Similarly, for the right-wing campaign of 1989 'Light up the Border' former mayor of San Diego and radio talk show host Roger Hedcock, aided by councilwoman Muriel Watson, urged San Diegans as a team to meet up on Thursdays and line up their cars at dusk to shine their lights at the border in order to discourage illegal immigration. In protest of this populist campaign, members of the BAW/TAF and other activists held up mirrors to 'return the light' to the car owners.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Maria Jimenez and Rebecca Phares, 'The U.S.- Mexico Border: A Strategy of Low-Intensity Conflict,' *Social Justice* 27 (2000): 33

⁶⁷ Andreas, *Border Games*, p. xiv.

⁶⁸ Marguerite Waller, 'From Border Boda or Divorce Fronterizo?,' in *Radical Street Performance: An International Anthology*, ed. Jan Cohen-Cruz (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp.86-87.

After 9/11 the spectacular surveillance methods have escalated. A (shocking) example is that of the Border Patrol of Texas that in 2007 installed surveillance cameras on the border and streamed their contents onto a website, for the 'concerned citizens' to access and monitor.⁶⁹ Unfortunately, since Akerman's video, the vigilantism has increased due to the rising number of Minutemen. In 2005, these vigilantes started as a group of 'border watchers' in Arizona who claimed to observe the border and report 'trespassers' to the Border Patrol. The Minutemen purposefully created a spectacle to attract media attention in order to place immigration and border policing at the centre-stage of U.S. politics. They wore all the trappings of a quasi-military group including bulletproof vests, binoculars, and visible and often large arms.⁷⁰ According anthropologist Leo R. Chavez '[...] The Minutemen Project used surveillance to produce a spectacle on the Arizona-Mexico U.S. border', adding that '[...] the public performance is one that emphasizes the power and privileges of citizenship.'⁷¹

In line with the argument I made earlier that issues of representation play a crucial role in shaping Mexico-U.S. relations, anthropologist Nicholas de Genova, who has written extensively on the Mexico-U.S. border, underlines how images play a crucial role in the 'border spectacle':

[...] The Border Spectacle is a spectacle of *enforcement* at "the" border, whereby the spectre of migrant "illegality" is rendered spectacularly visible. *The material practices of immigration enforcement, then, must be understood to be enmeshed in a dense weave of discourse and image [...]*the Border Spectacle relentlessly augments and embellishes the mundane and diminutive human mobility of migrants with the mystique of an obnoxious and unpardonable transgression of the presumably sacrosanct boundary of the state's space [...]⁷² [My emphasis].

⁶⁹ Brown, *Walled States*, p. 88.

⁷⁰ Leo R. Chavez, 'Spectacle in the Desert: The Minuteman Project on the US-Mexico Border,' in *Global Vigilantes*, ed. David Pratten and Atreyee Seen (London: Hurst and Company, 2007), pp. 25-27.

⁷¹ Chavez, 'Spectacle in the Desert,' p. 27.

⁷² Nicholas de Genova, 'Border, Scene and Obscene,' in *A Companion to Border Studies* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 492-493.

As such, much of the security that takes place of the border is deliberately rendered 'spectacularly visible.' Since images and questions of representation are such a strong component in Mexico-U.S. relations, as de Genova articulates, I think that artistic strategies are particularly suited to underline the detrimental effects of spectacle and propose alternative geopolitical imaginaries.

Throughout this dissertation, I will underline the ways in which the border acts as a stage for performing reassuring (and, as Jottar points out, violent) acts that consolidate and lend credibility to the existence of the nation-state in order to show how the artists I engage with problematize its legitimacy ultimately attempting to debunk it. . As I mentioned, the BAW/TAF's *The End of the Line* takes the border as a stage by conducting a carnival but in order to underline the artificiality of borders and the oppressiveness of dominant historical narratives. As it will become clear in the second chapter, Gómez-Peña uses comedy in order to criticise the U.S.'s methods of aggressive surveillance that provide a 'comforting image of order.' Akerman highlights how the Mexico-U.S. border is an artificial boundary by focusing on the homogenous desertic landscape of the Mexico-U.S. border often refusing to tell us which side of the border she is filming in.

Site-Oriented Practices and the Expanded Site of the Nation-State

In his essay 'The Functional Site; Or, The Transformation of Site Specificity,' first published in 1996 art historian James Meyer usefully distinguished between two different sets of site-specific work: literal and functional. The former denotes in situ work that, more often than not, is commissioned specifically for the site. Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981) would be a paradigmatic example of a literal site since it is in situ and located in a particular place. There have been a number of literal artworks taking place at the Mexico-U.S. border, and as such Meyer's essay is useful in situating those practices discussed in this dissertation. For instance, in a work specifically commissioned by InSite, Venezuelan artist Javier Téllez in his *One Flew Over the Void*

(2005), organised an event that could be described as a circus performance.⁷³ Protesting against the physical barrier that separates Mexico from the U.S., he collaborated with inhabitants living close to the border and asked them to wear animal masks. The event culminated with a stuntman who, under the direction of Téllez, crossed the border by being 'shot' as a human cannonball **(Plate 0.3)**.⁷⁴ The director of InSite, Michael Krichman, claimed that this project was 'a sort of spectacle so out of the ordinary that officials did not see it as jeopardizing their everyday systems of control.'⁷⁵

However, especially in the context of a biennial, the problem with artworks like Téllez's, in my view, is that they can participate in the spectacle of the border instead of critiquing it. Indeed, as I discussed in the previous section, the Mexico-U.S. border is already a stage for a myriad of spectacular and warped representations often driven by fear and paranoia and sometimes rooted in nationalism and xenophobia. Arguably, the theatricalization of sovereignty—the 'shock and awe' methods mobilised by governmental and military bodies—have prompted artists to adopt similar strategies. Art critic Julian Stallabrass in his book *Art Incorporated* argues that as mass media becomes more spectacular, immersive art has had to adopt similar strategies while adding its own 'aesthetic and estranged edge.'⁷⁶ In a project that would have been site-specific if it had been carried to fruition is the one proposed by Argentinian-Canadian artist César Saëz. His 2008 proposed project—that remained unrealised due to technical and pecuniary difficulties—entitled *Geostationary Banana Over Texas*, consisted of a three hundred meter flying banana-shaped object, or blimp, that would traverse the Mexico-U.S. border entering Texas at an altitude of approximately forty kilometres. Saëz built a website (now extinct) where he showcased digitally constructed images of what the blimp would look like from different viewpoints

⁷³ Ila Sheren, 'Performing Migration: Art and Site Specificity at the U.S. Mexico Border,' *The International Journal of the Arts in Society* 4 (2009): p.355.

⁷⁴ Melissa Gronlund, 'Acting Naturally: The Face and the Mask,' *Afterall* 18 (2008), online journal. <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.18/acting.naturally.face.and.mask>. Date accessed: July 11th 2013.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Sheren, 'Performing Migration,' p.362.

⁷⁶ Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.93.

(Plate 0.4).⁷⁷ The proposal attracted ample media attention: ‘Look there, in the Texan sky! It’s a bird! It’s a plane! It’s...a banana?’ wrote *Wired* magazine correspondent Lara Crigger about, in her words, this ‘fruity dirigible’ or ‘astrofruit’ object that, she predicted, would ‘launch a thousand UFO conspiracies.’⁷⁸

A case could be made that, for all of its comic absurdity, this hallucinatory object that remained in its conceptual stages pointed to—and hilariously ridiculed—the exaggerated theatricality so often staged at the Mexico-U.S. border. As art historian Lee Rodney remarked, instilling fear of UFO’s in this instance, especially in the home state of NASA’s headquarters, was used to foreground and subvert ‘[...] the politics of fear that have reigned supreme in American Culture.’⁷⁹ The same could be argued of Téllez’s work—rather than participating in the Mexico-U.S. border spectacle that I articulated in the previous section, the work critically points to the theatricality of the region by parodically staging a circus act. For me, however, these types of works walk the too thin and wobbling line of fetishism and spectacle that already characterises the region. This is not to condemn literal site-specific works but rather that, given the already spectacular set of relations that frame the Mexico-U.S. border, creating works that engage so directly with the spectacle operate dangerously closely to the sensationalist economy that they are trying to critique. Even if we endorse a critical reading of these works like the one proposed by Rodney, these do not excavate the region’s complexities beyond underlining the ‘politics of fear’ and spectacle. For this reason, I have chosen to examine works that analyse the border more subtly and in a more sustained manner.

Whilst it is true that a similar criticism that I launched at Téllez’s work can be applied to the BAW/TAF’s project since the members also staged a carnival at the border, it will become clear in the first chapter how their sustained and long-standing engagement—using strategies inspired by the historical avant-garde—offered a sophisticated critique of historical narratives that problematized notions of bounded communities. In addition, their 1986 project was carried out almost twenty years

⁷⁷ Lee Rodney, ‘Inverted Geographies: North America Inside-Out,’ *Parallax* 14 (2008): 31.

⁷⁸ Lara Crigger, ‘Space Banana to Soar Over Texas,’ in *Wired*, online version, January 29th, 2007. <http://www.wired.com/culture/art/news/2007/01/72550>. Date accessed: July 11th 2013.

⁷⁹ Rodney, ‘Inverted Geographies,’ p.31.

prior to Téllez's. It would not be until 1994 that spectacular politics radically increased with the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper. As such, the issues of spectacle were not as present or pressing during the 1980s as they were in the following decades.

Returning to the functional site, Meyer claims that it incorporates a vast set of artistic practices ranging from the varied work of Renée Green, Christian Philipp Müller to that of Ursula Biemann, a key artist of *Geographies of Violence*. For Meyer, the functional work:

[...] May or may not incorporate a physical place [...] It is a process, an operation occurring between sites, a mapping of institutional and textual filiations and the bodies that move between them [...] The functional work explores an "expanded" site: the "art world," in this activity, has become a site within a network of sites, an institution among other institutions. [...] This expanded institutional critique is as much at home in natural history and anthropological collections, in zoos, parks, housing projects, and public bathrooms, as in the art gallery or museum; it may engage several sites, institutions, and collaborators at once [...] A functional practice, insofar as it traces the artist's movements through and around the institution [...] inscribes his or her subjectivity within the work [...] ⁸⁰

One example of the functional site that Meyer gives is Müller's *Illegal Crossings between Austria and Principality of Lichtenstein* (1993) where the artist performed illegal immigrants journeys and photographed himself at various border crossings thus inscribing his subjectivity and enacting an 'operation occurring between sites.' Like Meyer, I will also incorporate a very diverse set of practices that engage with the 'expanded site' of the Mexico-U.S. border. Drawing on the lines of enquiry opened up by the 'spatial turn,' Meyer claims that functional practices adopt a 'mobile notion of site' and function as an expanded version of institutional critique.⁸¹ In line with Meyer's claim and the development of the 'spatial turn,' Kwon has written that 'The slide from site-specific to issue-specific in public art can be seen as yet another

⁸⁰ James Meyer, 'The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity,' in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp.25-28.

⁸¹ Meyer, 'The Functional Site,' p. 32.

example of the ways in which the concept of site has moved away from one of concrete physical location'⁸²

Although Meyer mentions the work of Biemann in passing, he does not unpack how the proliferation of documentary video features in the history of site-specific practices. Briefly, the 'documentary turn' has witnessed an expansion of the category of 'the documentary' in order to find a way of representing the oppressive reality that characterises living and working conditions under neoliberalism. This so-called turn became especially conspicuous after Documenta XI in 2002 that, curated by Okwui Enwezor, was largely dominated by video. For the most part, the accounts of the so-called 'documentary turn'—the history of which I will unpack in relation to the work of Biemann and Akerman—do not take into account the concomitant development in other avant-garde practices. That is to say, there has been scant dialogue on the part of critics and art historians that cuts across medium boundaries in relation to site-specificity.

It is important to underline here that most of the debates surrounding site specificity—including that of Kwon and Meyer's—were published in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In fact, Kwon's book was published in 2002, the same year that Documenta XI took place. Given the 'documentary turn's' recent consolidation in academic circles *in relation* to site-specific debates that were at their height over a decade ago, this helps explain why documentary practices and histories of site-specific work have, for the most part, not intersected. *Geographies of Violence*, on the other hand, insists that functional practices manifested themselves in a variety of mediums, including video.

One trend that characterises documentary practices as well as many of the site-specific practices of the 1990s that both Kwon and Meyer describe, is the investigation of the ideological underpinnings of space and geography by artists using an ethnographic approach. In his aforementioned seminal essay, 'The Artist as Ethnographer' Foster describes what he identifies as 'the ethnographic turn' whereby artists are consumed by an ethnographic envy and '[...] aspire to fieldwork in which

⁸² Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p. 112.

theory and practice seem to be reconciled.’⁸³ Linking this turn to site-specificity, he claims that the artist as ethnographer ‘[...] treat[s] conditions like desire or disease [...] as sites for art.’⁸⁴ Foster does briefly discuss documentary practices in relation to Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula’s work but does not elaborate their inclusion in his essay to a great extent. Kwon in *One Place After Another* articulates a similar trend:

A dominant drive of site oriented practices today is the pursuit of a more intense engagement with the outside world and everyday life—a critique of culture that is inclusive of nonart spaces, nonart institutions, and nonart issues [...] current manifestations of site specificity tend to treat aesthetic and art historical concerns as secondary issues. Deeming the focus on the social nature of *art’s* production and perception to be too exclusive [...] this expanded engagement with culture favors public sites outside the traditional confines of art both in physical and intellectual terms⁸⁵

All of the artists that I have assembled in *Geographies of Violence* deal with ‘nonart’ issues: the BAW/TAF highlights and proposes alternatives to the oppressive historical narratives that lend legitimacy of the nations-state; Gómez-Peña problematizes notions of identity that function along the lines of exclusion; Biemann investigates the negative effects of corporate globalisation in relation to female low-skilled labour; Akerman highlights how representations of land are complicit with nation-state building projects; and, finally, Margolles examines the extreme violence that has characterised Mexico during the last couple of decades. As such, as well as engaging with site-oriented practices, all of the artists that I am concerned with are interested in how the ‘site’ in art can be used to understand the spatial politics of the Mexico-U.S. border. It is true Margolles is less concerned with spatial politics than the other artists that I consider. However, as I will expand on the fifth chapter, her concern with the bloodshed that as gripped Mexico in recent years explains her inclusion in *Geographies of Violence*. Additionally, including Margolles’ works, the practices that I examine often adopt an ethnographic approach: Gómez-Peña conducts polls and interviews to study the audience’s reactions to his performances; Margolles collects

⁸³ Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’, p.181.

⁸⁴ Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer,’ p.184.

⁸⁵ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p.24.

'samples' she finds at crime scenes and subsequently incorporates them into her artworks; whilst Biemann and Akerman adopt the participant observation method capturing the lives of people who live close to the Mexico-U.S. border.

Although I follow roughly the same genealogy of site-specificity than Kwon and Meyer, my account takes into consideration how artists, using a variety of mediums that include video, explored site-specific issues. In other words, I argue that site-oriented practices developed across a wider variety of mediums than dominant accounts of site-oriented practices—like Kwon and Meyer's—have so far acknowledged. In fact, I also keep in mind the history of performance art in relation to site-specificity especially in my discussion of the works of the BAW/TAF and Gómez-Peña. Like Meyer and Kwon, I also trace the genealogy of site-oriented practices to the legacies of institutional critique, land art and minimalism and as such, I will consider these practices at certain and often several points throughout this dissertation.

Conclusion

For this introduction, I started by discussing the work of academics who have engaged with border art in order to distinguish my own project from theirs. *Geographies of Violence*, unlike other accounts of 'border art,' centres on spatial politics and site-oriented practices and, although takes into consideration the effects of NAFTA, does not take them as their point of departure. Indeed, eight years prior to the signing of NAFTA, my project starts in 1986 with the BAW/TAF's *The End of the Line*. This is because during this time, artists in the region adopted a more overtly transnational outlook and, like Anderson, were questioning the neutrality of the nation-state as a legitimate and coherent entity. Neither does my dissertation consider extensively the works commissioned by InSite since I am suspicious of the biennial's role in fostering binational relations in a way that supports neoliberalist policies. Rather, by tapping into the potential of the intersection between politics and aesthetics, I unpack the ways in which artists have engaged with the ideological underpinnings of the nation-state and space. Afterwards, I outline some of the theorists that have changed the way we think about space and borders and maintain that throughout this thesis I embrace

the view that space is relational and that borders are not predetermined entities but rather ideologically inscribed and complicit in framing and determining binational relations. Paying particular attention to the politics of spectacle, I maintain that artistic practices are particularly suited to examining and proposing more productive geopolitical representations since spectacle operates at the level of images. Finally, I outline the methodological framework pointing out that I have proposed a new model of site-specificity that updates, expands and modifies those put forward by Kwon, Foster and Meyer. Amongst others, my methodology will help unpack the complicity of space in framing and determining a myriad of relationships and foreground the usefulness of the theoretical framework of site-specificity.

Nation-state borders are crucial in the understanding of economic globalisation and mass migrations. They bring to the fore the vital importance of geography to our everyday realities. As political scientist Seyla Benhabib claims, '[...] nowhere are the tensions between the demands of postnational universalistic solidarity and the practices of exclusive membership more apparent than at the site of territorial borders and boundaries.'⁸⁶ The artworks that I have chosen to discuss in this dissertation will touch upon some of the most pressing and enduring problems that face this geopolitical space. To note a few: the global economy and its main actors who constantly search for low-cost labour at the expense of worker's living and working conditions, generating gross economic inequality; availability of guns and, in the U.S., legislation protecting their widespread availability; militarisation of the 'war on drugs'; neoimperialism at the military, political and economic levels; forms of representation and cultural norms that opt for a sensationalist approach rather than a critical understanding; historical narratives that attempt to cement national identity and balkanise groups at the expense of transnational harmony.

The artworks that I analyse and my interpretations of them afford counter-narratives to globalisation that reveal how the contemporary world is still governed by violent and often arbitrary geographical demarcations. But they are also an

⁸⁶ Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.17.

attempt to create alternative imaginaries that metamorphose into glimpses of hope of a future free from today's oppressive cartographies.

Chapter One

Violent Beginnings: Recycling Historical Narratives in The Border Art Workshop's *The End of the Line*

More often than not, the borders of nation-states were created violently, and the one that separates Mexico from the U.S. is no exception. In fact, the current geographical configuration between Mexico and the U.S. was defined in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 that ended the Mexican-American war and re-drew the two thousand-mile boundary that now separates the two countries. Mexico was forced to sell over half of its territory to the U.S.⁸⁷ Discussing the connection between violence, territory and history French philosopher Jacques Derrida persuasively pointed out in an interview that 'All nation-states have violent origins [...] Successful unifications or foundations only ever succeed in making one forget that there never was a natural unity or a prior foundation.'⁸⁸

Looking at the violent origins of the creation of the Mexico-U.S. border is a fitting point of departure for this dissertation. Examining Homi Bhabha's notion of the performative temporality of the nation-state as well as Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on the carnivalesque, I will discuss the work of a group of artists known as The Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF) that not only underlined the violence that characterised the creation of the Mexico-U.S. border but also proposed a different way of conceiving history, one that attempted to break from the straightjacket of history's linearity.⁸⁹ The Workshop was created in 1984 as a collective group of mostly Mexican, American and Chicano artists who continued to work together until 1989 in the San Diego/Tijuana region.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Lawrence A. Herzog, *Where North Meets South: Cities, Space, and Politics on the U.S. Mexico Border* (Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies and University of Texas at Austin, 1990), p.4.

⁸⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'The Deconstruction of Actuality,' in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews (1971-2001)*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 115.

⁸⁹ Many of the BAW/TAF's titles always have a slash in order to separate the English title from the Spanish one. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Spanish are my own.

⁹⁰ Although Chicanos is often the term used to denominate Americans from Mexican decent, Max Benavidez has defined this category as '[...]someone who is critically aware of the systematic,

San Diego, the second largest city in California, was a particularly fertile ground for the Workshop to emerge. It was, and still is, a politically conservative American city that has been the focal point of many of the immigration debates as it directly neighbours the northern Mexican city of Tijuana, and is one of the main routes for incoming Mexican migrants. Military presence is felt on two fronts in this Californian city. Firstly, the highly sophisticated military infrastructure put in place in order to police the border, situated at the Western-most end of the 3000 km length of the binational divide.⁹¹ Secondly, the city boasts the largest naval base on the West Coast on which it is very much economically dependent, for several decades hosting the largest concentration of veteran residents in California. The military and defence investment put in place after World War II brought wealth and prosperity to the city, one that greatly diminished with the end of the Cold War. Political sociologists have linked the strong military presence to the city's general conservative values, expressed by the inhabitants' extensive support for the Republican Party and the widespread anti-immigration sentiments.⁹²

The BAW/TAF was in constant flux, some members leaving and new ones arriving. The group met weekly to discuss and to intervene through different means in the social landscape of the border area, foregrounding issues of migration as well as human rights abuses committed by the U.S. border patrol. They produced an annual journal, *The Broken Line/ La Línea Quebrada*, and some members, particularly Emily Hicks, an academic who formally joined the Workshop in 1987, wrote numerous theoretical texts relating to the border.

institutionalized inequality to which Mexican Americans have historically been subjected in multiple arenas.' [Max Benavidez, *Gronk* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2007), p. 22.] Similarly, in 1970, Rubén Salazar, a prominent journalist and activist who reported on the Chicano movement and was killed by a police officer whilst protesting, has defined this group as 'a Mexican-American with a non-Anglo image of himself.' [Quoted in Eva Sperling Cockroft, 'From Barrio to Mainstream: The Panorama of Latino Art,' in *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States: Literature and Art*, ed. Francisco Lomelí, Nicolás Kanellos and Claudio Esteva-Fabregat (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1993), p. 193.]

⁹¹ Philip Brookman, 'El Centro Cultural de la Raza: Fifteen Years,' in *Made in Aztlan: Centro Cultural De La Raza Fifteenth Anniversary*, ed. Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Philip Brookman (San Diego: Centro Cultural de la Raza, 1986), pp. 13-14.

⁹² Steven P. Erie, Vladimir Kogan and Scott A. MacKenzie, *Paradise Plundered: Fiscal Crisis and Governance Failures in San Diego* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p.6-16.

For the members, the border was artificial in more than one sense: the line is not dependent upon a natural boundary; it had already been redrawn in 1848 after the Mexican-American War; and finally, it divided a culture that was too close to be unnaturally fenced off. Pointing to a misguided sense of history and foregrounding how the border was first established, the BAW/TAF attempted to show that, in the words of member David Ávalos: ‘Even though there’s a fence separating us, maybe we’re actually on the same side of history [...]’.⁹³ In a similar note, BAW/TAF member Guillermo Gómez-Peña, during a later performance that was turned into a video entitled *Naftaztec*, which I will discuss in detail in the following chapter, remarked: ‘the U.S. suffers from a severe case of amnesia. In its obsessive quest to construct the future it tends to forget or erase the past.’ At the same time, the BAW/TAF’s critique was also accompanied by what the members critiqued as pernicious ethnic stereotypes made possible by historical (mis)constructions. I have chosen to concentrate on the BAW/TAF’s performance piece *The End of the Line* of 1986 (**Plate 1.1**) since the group’s aim of problematizing historical narratives was particularly conspicuous and sophisticatedly unpacked in this piece and, as I will go on to show, many of their on-going concerns materialised in this elaborate performance.

For *The End of the Line*, carried out on Columbus day, several members of the BAW/TAF congregated on Imperial Beach, situated on the border where San Diego and Tijuana meet and where the fence constructed by the U.S. came to a halt, leaving an open place of respite between the twin cities and effectively turning the borderline into a stage.⁹⁴ Wearing elaborate and voluminous costumes made out of foam, they invited approximately two hundred viewers, comprised of artists, journalists, photographers, undocumented workers, and several other passers-by, who observed the performance whilst eating the one hundred and fifty corncobs that the members

⁹³ Quoted in Scott Kessler, ‘Imagine No Borders: Interview with an Artist,’ in *Borderthink! A Survival Guide for the Bush Era*, ed. Monty Reed Kroopkin (San Diego: New Indicator Collective at U.C.S.D, 1989), p. 23.

⁹⁴ I am indebted to the description of *The End of the Line* to Michael Schnorr who not only answered many of my questions relating to this performance, but also provided me with a video clip of it (interview with the artist on 9 April 2010).

had distributed among them. On top of each of two tall opposing poles, placed on each side of border, the members set one half of what was once a single red table, which they claimed represented the Last Supper **(Plate 1.2)**.⁹⁵ The members aligned themselves in front of the section of the border that was fenced—for unlike today, the fence did not extend all the way onto the beach and into the Pacific Ocean—dividing themselves into groups of two, each in a different country. Guillermo Gómez-Peña recalls that the ‘Mexicans were in Mexican territory, and the Chicanos and Anglos were on the U.S. side’ **(Plate 1.3)**.⁹⁶ On the fence itself, small mirrors for each member were placed just below shoulder-height. Using a hammer, Viviana Enrique, a member of the Centro Cultural de la Raza, broke all of the mirrors, and each time she shattered one, she crossed into the other side of the border. Afterwards, the Workshop members placed a long rotating table, painted to look like a freeway on the border itself—sometimes positioning it on a North to South axis, and sometimes East to West, oscillating between the coupling and de-coupling of the geopolitical divide, thus provocatively crossing the border illegally whilst breaking corn and passing it along the table **(Plate 1.4)**.

Transnational Histories: Conceptual Art’s Legacy

In what follows, I will historically situate the development of the BAW/TAF within a wide range of artistic practices that include Southern California’s activist performances of the 1970s, Chicano art collectives of the same decade together with Mexican artistic developments such as *teatro de carpa* (itinerant theatres characterised by satirical political sketches) as well as Mexico City’s collectives known as *los grupos*. Situating the BAW/TAF within a binational history enables me to align my analysis to the members’ critique of bounded and monolithic concepts of nationhood.

⁹⁵ Interview with Michael Schnorr on 9 April 2010.

⁹⁶ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, ‘A Binational Performance Pilgrimage,’ *TDR* 35 (1991): 38.

According to performance artist and critic Coco Fusco, many of the performances made by under-represented or minority groups during the 'performance boom' of the 1980s and 1990s are often analysed and read by critics within an Eurocentric art historical perspective, the genealogy of which stems back to, among others, the Futurist, Dadaist and Surrealist events of the 1920s and 1930s, the works made by the Black Mountain College Group of the 1950s and, more recently, the Happenings of the 1960s. For Fusco, such a narrative erroneously '[...] lends credence to the assumption that American artists of colour started doing performance thanks to the multicultural policies of the 1980s.'⁹⁷ In order to dismantle such a biased narrative, Fusco maintains, we should take into consideration the critical influence of non-western performers whose work is couched in both aesthetic transgression and irreverence.⁹⁸

Indeed, an antecedent for *The End of the Line* can be found in the popular *teatro de carpa* that translates from Spanish to 'theatre under a tent.' These popular shows blossomed in post-revolutionary Mexico when more expensive spectacles endured great economic hardships and had to close their doors. From the end of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th, *teatros de carpa* satirised political events in an era of strong censorship. Didactic, they often acted as newspapers informing the public of everyday events in a subversive and humorous manner.⁹⁹ During the 1960s, they also became popular with the Chicano movement in the American Southwest where the *carpas* became bilingual.¹⁰⁰ *Carpas* did not require a venue and they moved from one place to another to deliver their improvised performances that often unravelled as parodies of historical or contemporary events, riddled with pungent political satire that frequently employed satirical sketches. For example in the American Southwest *La Carpa de los Rascuachis*, originally produced in 1974, was a satire based on the lives

⁹⁷ Coco Fusco, 'Performance and the Power of the Popular,' in *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance*, ed. Catherine Ugwu (London and Seattle: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1995), p. 160.

⁹⁸ Fusco, 'Performance and the Power of the Popular,' p.161.

⁹⁹ Roselyn Costantino, 'Lo Erótico, Lo Exótico y el Taco: El Reciclaje Cultural en el Arte y Performance de Maris Bustamante,' *Chasqui* 25 (1996): 6.

¹⁰⁰ Yolanda Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), pp. 52-53.

of migrant farmworkers.¹⁰¹ The performers of Teatro Campesino not only inserted elements of Mexican *carpas* but also of Italian *commedia dell'arte* and the agitprop theatre of the 1960s.¹⁰²

In a similar note to Fusco, trying to debunk the tendency to read Latin American work as a poor derivation of Conceptual Art practitioners working in the U.S. and Europe, art historian Mari Carmen Ramírez has argued that Conceptual Art in Latin America took a more salient activist trajectory than elsewhere, tending to invest artworks with social and political meaning, targeting general mechanisms of ideology and power.¹⁰³ Echoing these arguments, Peter Osborne, who has written extensively on Conceptual Art, has stated that:

“Ideological content” is the key term of Latin American Conceptual art. In distinction from the more formal ideational concerns of most US and European Conceptual art (the act/ event, mathematical series, linguistic propositions or the structures of cultural forms), this was an art for which ideology itself became the fundamental “material identity” of the conceptual proposition.¹⁰⁴

Taking into account transnational artistic practices becomes especially critical when historically contextualising the work of the BAW/TAF since the members had very diverse backgrounds. Indeed, the Workshop was founded by Chicano artists David Ávalos, known for his political activist work as well as for his focus on Chicano communities in San Diego; Victor Ochoa, one of the pioneers of the Chicano movement in San Diego; Trinidadian Jude Eberhard, a documentary filmmaker; Americans Michael Schnorr, an activist professor at Southwestern College in San Diego, Sarah-Jo Berman, a dancer and performance artist, and Philip Brookman, a curator; Mexicans Isaac Artenstein, also a documentary filmmaker, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, also a

¹⁰¹ Roselyn Costantino, ‘Visibility as Strategy: Jesusa Rodríguez’s Body in Play,’ in *Corpus Delecti: Performance of the Americas*, ed. Coco Fusco (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 63.

¹⁰² Israel Reyes, ‘Transcultural Humor,’ in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States*, ed. Suzanne Oboler and Deena J. González (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 383.

¹⁰³ Mari Carmen Ramírez, ‘Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America,’ in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexandro Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999), pp. 550-562

¹⁰⁴ Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art* (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2002), p.37.

performance artist whose career blossomed in the 1990s and became the most critically acclaimed artist of the group.¹⁰⁵ Except for Michael Schnorr, whose work with the Workshop continued well into the 1990s, all of the numerous founding members had left by 1989 to pursue individual careers.

Southern California's exuberant and politically grounded art's scene of the 1970s, with a strong penchant for performance art and collaborative art practices, undoubtedly had an impact on the BAW/TAF's work. Within this region, however, the prominent performance art production of Los Angeles often outshines the work based in San Diego. Linda Frye Burnham, an art historian who wrote one of the first surveys of performance art in Southern California, argues that in this region the two most important centres were Los Angeles and San Diego, but also that, nevertheless, 'San Diego is the country, Los Angeles is the city.'¹⁰⁶ Be that as it may, the importance of the latter is enhanced, *inter alia*, by the presence of the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), which became a pivotal centre for politically motivated artists. During the 1970s and 1980s its faculty included Allan Kaprow, Eleanor and David Antin, as well as performance art expert Moira Roth, who wrote extensively on its developments in California.¹⁰⁷ Some members of the BAW/TAF, such as David Ávalos, went on to teach at UCSD. Frye Burnham maintains that UCSD was the only place where fine art students are regularly exposed to cutting edge performance artists.¹⁰⁸

During the 1970s, in both Southern California and Mexico City, albeit with very different agendas, politically active collective groups started to emerge. *Los grupos*, a movement that dovetails with Ramírez and Osborne's observation of the development of Conceptual art, encompassed approximately twelve artistic collectives predominantly based in Mexico City. Crucially, they were heavily influenced by the development of the *carpas*. *Los grupos* rose to prominence in the Mexican art scene during the 1970s, to a large extent to retaliate for the violent governmental reprisals

¹⁰⁵ Jo-Anne Berelowitz, 'Conflict Over "Border Art": Whose subject, whose border, whose show?' *Third Text* 40 (1997): 70.

¹⁰⁶ Linda Frye Burnham, 'Performance Art in Southern California: An Overview,' in *Performance Anthology: Source Book for a Decade of California Performance Art*, ed. Carl E. Loeffler and Darlene Tong (San Francisco: Contemporary Arts Press, 1980), p.392.

¹⁰⁷ Frye Burnham, 'Performance Art in Southern California,' p. 391.

¹⁰⁸ Frye Burnham, 'Performance Art in Southern California,' pp.391-392.

of the '68 student movement. Gómez-Peña has gone so far as to claim that without them '[...] there would be no experimental art in Mexico today.'¹⁰⁹ Concomitantly, on the other side of the border, activist artists during the 1970s and 1980s were innovatively revamping the premises of Conceptual Art of the 1960s by injecting them with political meaning.¹¹⁰ The goal that these artists shared with Conceptual artists working in Europe and North America was their interest in replacing the artwork as a commodity and as a perceptual object with—as art historian Benjamin Buchloh put it in 1990 referring to artists such as Mel Bochner, Sol Le Witt and Joseph Kosuth—‘the work as an analytical proposition’ that was later extended to the critique of institutions.¹¹¹ Reframing this project, Chicanos, feminists, as well as artists working in Mexico were investing political content into their dematerialised and often ephemeral works in order to launch a powerful critique to what they perceived to be widely held patriarchal and racist beliefs.

Proceso Pentágono (Process Pentagon), one of the most acclaimed of *los grupos* collectives, emerged in the art scene in 1973. Like all of *los grupos* founded in the 1970s, they often eschewed being involved with museums and galleries, and instead took most of their artistic practice to the streets. Much of their work was a critique of the sprawling urbanisation of Mexico City and the sense of alienation and violence that subsequently accompanied it. For instance, in *A Nivel Informativo* (At An Informative Level) of 1973 (**Plate 1.5**), Proceso Pentágono was invited to present its work in Mexico City's Palacio de Bellas Artes (Palace of Fine Arts), perhaps the most prominent government financed cultural centre in the country. Instead, shunning this prestigious institution, they took most of their work to the street. One of these works staged a kidnapping outside Bellas Artes: in front of a dumbfounded audience, three

¹⁰⁹ Gómez-Peña, 'A Binational Performance,' p.28.

¹¹⁰ Peggy Phelan, 'Violence and Rupture: Misfires of the Ephemeral,' in *Live Art in LA: Performance in Southern California, 1970-1983*, ed. Peggy Phelan (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 6-7.

¹¹¹ Benjamin Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,' *October* 55 (1990): 107.

members of the group threw a sack over the head of another artist, tied him up and carried him away.¹¹²

Los grupos artistic practice underlined the importance of the audience's participation. According to Felipe Ehrenberg—probably the most notable artist of Proceso Pentágono, who went on to collaborate in some of the events held by the BAW/TAF—the most radical achievement of *los grupos* was the collectivisation of artistic practices that countered a feeling of isolation in the face of Mexico's rapidly expanding cities.¹¹³ Ehrenberg, together with the other members of Proceso Pentágono, was in contact and collaborated with Chicano groups working in the United States.¹¹⁴ Central to the political project of *los grupos* was to create counterhegemonic practices intended to undermine the Mexican government's often-repressive policies, predominantly applied to Leftist activists and intellectuals. As a collective, *los grupos* insisted on anonymous authorship that they believed created a prototype for a more democratic society. Lourdes Grobet, a member of Proceso Pentágono, claimed that as a principle 'We rejected leadership.'¹¹⁵ Most of *los grupos*, like their Chicano counterparts which I discuss below, started disintegrating in the early and mid 1980s. This was largely a result of the political reforms promoted by then Mexican president López Portillo that relaxed censorship of the press opening up other arenas for critical discussion.¹¹⁶

On the U.S. side of the border, roughly concurrently with *los grupos*, Chicano collectives also emerged in Southern California as early as the 1960s, during the civil rights movement. Their activities were characterised by, among other things, attempts

¹¹² Rubén Gallo, 'The Mexican Pentagon: Adventures in Collectivism during the 1970s,' in *Collectivism After Modernism*, ed. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp. 165-176.

¹¹³ According to Ehrenberg, *los grupos* foregrounding of the collective mode of operation in artistic practices was related to, among others, the *ejidos*. *Ejidors* are collectively owned pieces of land that, under the Mexican constitution were, until the early 1990s, protected from being sold in the market.

¹¹⁴ For more information see David R. Maciel, 'Mexico in Aztlán and Aztlán in Mexico: The Dialectics of Chicano-Mexicano Art,' in *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985*, ed. Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarno (Los Angeles: Wright Art Gallery and University of California, 1991), p. 116.

¹¹⁵ Edward J. McCaughan, *Art and Social Movements* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), pp.138-139.

¹¹⁶ Álvaro Vázquez Mantecón, 'Los Grupos: Una Reconsideración,' in *La Era de la Discrepancia: Arte y Cultura Visual en México*, ed. Olivier Debrouse (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and Turner, 2006), pp. 196-195.

to unionise California farm migrant workers. They also organised resistance to the invasion of Vietnam in large part because it caused the death of a disproportionate number of Chicanos compared to other ethnic groups in the U.S. In 1968, in an event popularly known as the Chicano Blowouts, Chicanos in East L.A. demonstrated and walked out of schools in response to the poor education that their sector of the population was receiving. The cultural activity of the Chicano collectives was marked by anti-capitalist and anti-commodity sentiments that turned to low-cost agit-prop theatre as well as the production of numerous murals.¹¹⁷

Very significant to the BAW/TAF's artistic production was the L.A. based collective group named Asco (nausea in English). Formed in the early 1970s and dissolved in 1987, Asco consisted of four Los Angeles based performance artists: Harry Gamboa Jr., Willie F. Herrón III, Patssi Valdez and Gronk. Gómez-Peña has asserted that Asco's performances were deeply influential to his work.¹¹⁸ Also turning their back on art institutions, Asco's members engaged in a powerful political critique articulated via street performances, murals, graffiti and pamphlet distribution.¹¹⁹ Maris Bustamante, one of the founding members of another collective entitled No Grupo, wrote an extensive article noting the similarities between *los grupos* and Asco that included their collective framework, the desire to dismantle hegemonic institutions as well as the efforts invested in order to level power imbalances and a deep fascination with Mexican popular culture.¹²⁰ Many of these characteristics were likewise present in the BAW/TAF's artistic production.

In a similar format to *The End of the Line*, Asco members also carried their political message across by sharing a meal in a public space. In December 24 of 1974 they staged *First Supper (after a Major Riot)* (**Plate 1.6**) in a traffic island in East Los

¹¹⁷ David E. James, 'No Movies: Projecting the Real by Rejecting the Reel,' in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective 1972-1987*, ed. C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Williamstown and Los Angeles: Williams College Museum of Art, 2011), pp.179-180.

¹¹⁸ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, 'A Binational Performance Pilgrimage,' p.32.

¹¹⁹ Chon A. Noriega, 'The Orphans of Modernism,' in *Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement*, ed. Rita Gonzalez, Howard N. Fox and Chon A. Noriega (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2008), pp.23-24.

¹²⁰ Maris Bustamante, 'Synchronies between Asco and No Grupo,' in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective 1972-1987*, ed. C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Williamstown and Los Angeles: Williams College Museum of Art, 2011), pp.310-311.

Angeles where three years earlier, in response to riots, police had shot indiscriminately at the crowd. The island formed part of an area that was 'redeveloped' in order to both attempt to erase the history of the area and to prevent further public demonstrations. It was in this location that the members of Asco re-enacted the Last Supper and eerily inserted several elements of the Day of the Dead celebrations—they wore heavy make-up and thrift store clothes—reminding the passers-by of the casualties caused by the police reaction to the riots.¹²¹ The table that the members set included a large nude doll, paintings of tortured corpses and a mirror alongside a celebratory meal that consisted of numerous fresh fruits and drinks. The performance was meant to encourage passers-by to voice their opinions—a democratic act that was violently denied to the protesters of East L.A.¹²²

Unlike other Chicano artists that were doing collective art works, Asco's performances deflected from a nationalistic and nostalgic bent that looked back at Mexican history and the Mexican School of art that other artists displayed by painting murals or producing posters that included indigenous imagery, Mexican revolutionary heroes or any other reference to the mythical land of Aztlán.¹²³ Gronk, for instance, stated that 'I don't do Virgins of Guadalupe. I don't do corn goddesses.'¹²⁴ Similarly, most of *los grupos* reacted against the hegemonic social realist style of Mexican muralists that had dominated much of the aesthetic production in Mexico in earlier decades.¹²⁵

For Chicanos, Aztlán, a term that comes from Nahuatl (the Aztec language), occupies the Southwest of the United States that once belonged to Mexico and symbolises the origins of the mestizo culture.¹²⁶ Chicana artist Yolanda M. López in her iconic lithograph *Who's the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?* of 1978 (**Plate 1.7**) illustrates

¹²¹ C. Ondine Chavoya, 'Internal Exiles: The Interventionist Public and Performance Art of Asco,' in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 196.

¹²² James, 'No Movies,' p.182.

¹²³ Benavidez, *Gronk*, p.40.

¹²⁴ Quoted in McCaughan, *Art and Social Movements*, p.81.

¹²⁵ McCaughan, *Art and Social Movements*, p.102.

¹²⁶ José Hernández, 'Hispanics Blend Diversity,' in *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States: Sociology*, ed. Félix Padilla, Nicolás Kanellos and Claudio Esteva-Fabregat (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1994), p.19.

this nationalistic bent of Chicano art that Asco members were trying to eschew. A man, portrayed with a pre-Columbian headdress, crumples a paper that has 'Immigration Plans' written on it.¹²⁷ According to art historian Shifra M. Goldman, who has written extensively on Chicano artistic production, during the 1970s there was a '[...] fraternity between mestizo Chicanos and Native Americans based on a commonality of "race" and oppression within the Anglo-dominated society [...]' ¹²⁸ Similarly, for art historian Alan W. Moore, such art '[...] worked with imagery of an ancient past to build racial pride through a recovery of historical culture.' ¹²⁹ Most works were community orientated and displayed in public places. Several Chicano collective groups emerged including the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF) formed in 1968 in Sacramento by California State University art professors José Montoya and Esteban Villa, together with their student Ricardo Favela.¹³⁰ This group, like the BAW/TAF later on, promoted student and the general public's collaboration. José Montoya claimed that the groups' aim was '[...] to get people living in Sacramento *barrios* involved in positive activities, to play an active role in demonstrating to the community at large that there is much to be admired in the Chicano culture.'¹³¹

Some of the BAW/TAF members continued to make references to Aztlán, particularly Chicano artist David Ávalos whose father had been a prominent figure in the Chicano movement. In 1983, before the Workshop was formed, Ávalos created a piece called *Lotería Chicana* (**Plate 1.8**) that showcased an image of a man holding a map of both Mexico and the U.S. with an inscription that translated to 'this was Mexico before the robbery,' referring to the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe in 1848 that ended the Mexican-American war, but at the cost of forcibly 'selling' over half of

¹²⁷ Chon A. Noriega, 'The Orphans of Modernism,' p.21.

¹²⁸ Shifra M. Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 146-147.

¹²⁹ Allan W. Moore, 'Artists' Collectives: Focus on New York, 1975-2000,' in *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*, ed. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p.195.

¹³⁰ Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art: Inside/Outside the Master's House* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), pp. 173-174.

¹³¹ Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas*, pp.168-169.

Mexico's former territory to the United States (including New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona and parts of Colorado, Utah, Nebraska as well as California) .¹³²

The diverse backgrounds of the numerous members of the Workshop meant that they did reflect the interests of particular groups (Chicanos in the case of Ávalos and Mexicans in the case of Gómez-Peña) but they did not confine their views to a single one. Despite of working collectively, their artistic production was far from univocal. Even though *Lotería Chicana* has remnants of the nationalistic vein of earlier Chicano works it can also be read within the Workshop's general critique of hermetic notions of nationhood, a subject that I will discuss in the last section of this chapter where I will return to Ávalos' work. This is the area where the BAW/TAF departed from the predominant collective ethos of the 1970s and 1980s for, in addition to disavowing such nationalism, they extended their critique to bounded notions of nationhood as well as attempting to offer a binational, rather than a national, perspective.

New Genre Public Art and Collaborative Paradigms: Food, Ritual and Community

Keeping in mind the artistic practices that I discussed in the previous section, I will now align the BAW/TAF's endeavours to what artist and critic Suzanne Lacy identified as 'new genre public art' that, in turn, Miwon Kwon, for her chapter 'From Site to Community in New Genre Public Art: The Case of "Culture in Action"' in *One Place After Another*, crucially inserts into the history of site-specificity. I will maintain that the BAW/TAF, instead of anchoring their practices in a critique of urban planning—as was characteristic of much of the public art of the 1980s—instead cast a wider net into the space of the nation-state. Specifically in relation to a Southern Californian context, I will also discuss the BAW/TAF's collaborative ethos and

¹³² For more information see Enrique Krauze, 'The Collapse of the Creoles,' in *Mexico: A Biography of Power: A History of Modern Mexico, 1810-1996*, trans. Hank Heifetz (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997), pp.119-151 and Louise Anó Nuevo Kerr, 'Mexican-Americans,' in *Multiculturalism in the United States: A Comparative Guide to Acculturation and Ethnicity*, ed. John D. Buenker and Lorman A. Ratner (New York, Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1992), pp. 215-230.

examine how the practice of sharing a meal has a complex history in site-oriented practices and 'new genre public art.'

The various influences that I have mentioned so far are anchored in the politics of site: Proceso Pentágono critiqued Mexico City's sprawling urbanisation by taking their practice to the streets whilst Asco, by staging a meal in a place that was redeveloped in order to hide the bloody history of the East L.A. riots, attempted to bring to light histories that urban planners were trying to bury and forget. These public interventions on particular sites should be situated within the history of site-oriented practices. In fact, this practice of artists engaging with 'nonart' issues in public spaces escalated during the 1980s. During that decade, artists were responding to the conservative backlash of the Reagan administration in the United States (1981-1989) that gave rise to multiple forms of censorship unseen since the 1950s.¹³³ In February of 1984, underlining this response, a few months before *The End of the Line* took place, *Newsweek* published an article entitled 'Art on the Barricades' that pointed out that 'political art' was back in fashion.¹³⁴

This increased politicisation of art practices was also accompanied by a trend in collaborative paradigms. In fact, Gómez-Peña placed the ethos of collaboration at the centre of 'border art' by claiming that: 'Border art is collaborative by nature.'¹³⁵ Art historian Alan W. Moore has claimed that 'The 1980s [...] was in fact a golden age of artist's groups.'¹³⁶ To give an example that also involved sharing a meal, Group Material, created five years before the BAW/TAF. Fitting in with 'new genre public art,' Group Material was an assemblage of artists, activists and writers, based in Manhattan, which had already engaged with a wide range of issues relating to gender, race, class struggle, among others, insisting that their work operated outside the art market's radar. Like the *modus operandi* of the BAW/TAF, their work consisted of an interdisciplinary series of lectures, films, and performances that often called for the participation of the audience. As a case in point, in 1981 Group Material organised

¹³³ Suzanne Lacy, 'Introduction: Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys,' in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), p.29.

¹³⁴ Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas*, p. 245.

¹³⁵ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *New World Border* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1996), p.169.

¹³⁶ Moore, 'Artists' Collectives: Focus on New York, 1975-2000,' p. 203.

Food and Culture (Eat this Show), an 'exhibition' where neighbours would bring a variety of cooked dishes to their gallery for everyone to enjoy, whilst promoting cultural dialogue by exchanging information about the participants personal histories and backgrounds.¹³⁷ Sharing a meal, like both Group Material and the BAW/TAF did, can be read as paradigmatic of such 'political art' and collaborative efforts.

Both the BAW/TAF and Group Material were responding to the political climate of the decade. For artist and critic Suzanne Lacy, '[...] Increased racial discrimination and violence were part of the eighties conservative backlash'¹³⁸ adding that due to the increasing number of immigrants living in the United States, ethnicity and nationality became of central importance. Women, 'minority' groups, and homosexuals were constantly under fire from the Right.¹³⁹ American citizens of Mexican decent became a prominent target largely due to their growing numbers.¹⁴⁰ Critical in terms of the history of site-oriented art, Lacy also identified a shift in artistic practice from the 1960s to the 1990s that she called 'new genre public art.' This, she maintains, involved a mixture of 'traditional and non traditional' media, much like the BAW/TAF's production that ranged from performances, journals, installations, costume design, amongst many others. An example of 'new genre public art' would be Lacy's own work of 1984 *Whisper, The Waves, the Wind* (**Plate 1.9**) created during the time she was a guest lecturer at UCSD. Carried out in a very similar format to *The End of the Line*, this work a performance in which more than 150 women over the age of sixty-five talked about issues that come with age and womanhood such as death, nursing homes and traditional female roles. This occurred on a beach in La Jolla, an upscale suburb of San Diego, where participants sat around the table dressed in white. Passers-by were allowed to join and listen to the conversations whilst pre-recorded stories of these women were playing in the background¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Jan Avgikos, 'Group Material Timeline: Activism as a Work of Art,' in *But is it Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, ed. Nina Felshin (Washington: Bay Press, Inc., 1995), pp. 85-116.

¹³⁸ Lacy, 'Introduction,' p.28.

¹³⁹ Lacy, 'Introduction,' p.29.

¹⁴⁰ Kerr, 'Mexican-Americans,' p. 214.

¹⁴¹ Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 39.

The 'new genre public art' that Lacy describes also include feminists and Chicano groups that worked collaboratively and sought to factor in the audience as a crucial component of the artwork. Lacy maintained that 'New genre public art calls for an integrative critical language through which values, ethics, and social responsibility can be discussed in terms of art.'¹⁴² Instead of critiquing the space where art was exhibited, like those artists working under the aegis of institutional critique—that, according to Kwon, had a pivotal role to play in the history of site-oriented practices—these artists widened their scope and, like Asco and Proceso Pentágono, critically unpacked the cultural and political inscriptions of 'nonart' spaces.

Describing politically motivated public art practices that characterised the 1980s, art historian Rosalyn Deutsche claimed that they aimed at making 'ideological operations' and the 'social organizations' of a particular space visible.¹⁴³ In *One Place After Another* Kwon, who elaborated on Deutsche's observations on site oriented practices, inserts 'new genre public art' into the history of site-specificity that aptly describes both *The End of the Line* and Lacy's aforementioned work:

For new genre public art not only insists on a reconsideration of (public) art's values and priorities along with alterations in its methodology and procedures; it also asserts a major rethinking of site specificity as a means to achieve its goals. In fact, advocates of new genre public art devalue, or at times explicitly reject, received definitions of the site and existing approaches to site specificity.¹⁴⁴

Artists of 'new genre public art,' according to Kwon, '[...] were exploring alternative strategies of adopting existing urban forms as sites of artistic intervention.'¹⁴⁵ In this way, site became conceived not so much as a physical place but as socially and culturally constructed one.¹⁴⁶ The site became another medium that tried to go

¹⁴² Lacy, 'Introduction,' p.43.

¹⁴³ Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996), p.68.

¹⁴⁴ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specificity and Locational Identity* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2002), p.108.

¹⁴⁵ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p.69

¹⁴⁶ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p. 74.

against the grain of artistic autonomy.¹⁴⁷ Kwon noted a particular interest on the part of artists to conceive of the public art work beyond its physical properties and, instead, reconfigure it with social, political and ethical reasons in mind.¹⁴⁸ By parodying the history of the so-called 'discovery' of the Americas, the BAW/TAF rethought received definitions of the nation-state and, therefore, problematized dominant definitions of site. The BAW/TAF revealed, borrowing the words of Étienne Balibar, how borders are not neutral spaces but are rather are '[...] apparatuses of control [and] instruments of discrimination and triage.'¹⁴⁹ Just like artists during the 1970s, working under the rubric of institutional critique, pointed to the lack of neutrality of the gallery space, so the members of the BAW/TAF were underlining the constructed and ideological nature that informs the very notion of the nation-state.

Discussing new genre public art, Kwon claims that many of the artists concerned do not position themselves within the context of site specificity but instead within the genealogy of the historical avant-garde and their efforts to imbricate art into life.¹⁵⁰ The BAW/TAF is no exception. *The End of the Line* can be historically placed within several performance practices that involved the collaborative practice of sharing of a meal—including Asco's *First Supper (after a Major Riot)*—that go back as early as the events of the futurists (notwithstanding that the futurists' nationalistic vein was diametrically opposed to the beliefs of the members of the BAW/TAF). The BAW/TAF's interest in sharing a meal can be traced as far back as the futurist *serate*¹⁵¹ orchestrated by F.T. Marinetti, a theatre critic and dramatist, is of relevance in this context. In her recently published book, art critic Claire Bishop claims that the futurist *serate* anticipate what we now call performance art.¹⁵² Marinetti stated that theatre could 'introduce the fist into the artistic battle' and cause 'the brutal entry of

¹⁴⁷ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p. 75.

¹⁴⁸ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p. 81.

¹⁴⁹ Balibar, 'What is a Border?', p.82.

¹⁵⁰ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p. 106.

¹⁵¹ We can even think of more recent artistic practices that often come under the rubric of 'relational aesthetics' such as Rikrit Tiravanji's Pad Thai series of the 1990s. For more information see Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,' *October* 110 (2004): 56-57

¹⁵² Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2012), p. 42.

life into art.’¹⁵³ Their renditions portrayed the key concepts of the futurist artistic movement: reading manifestos and presenting artistic creations, reading poetry and listening to music in a large theatre allowing audiences to participate. Later, Marinetti published a *Futurist Cookbook* in 1932, where he argued that food and eating was integral to futurist philosophy, politics and aesthetics.¹⁵⁴ Additionally, as I will elaborate, the costumes and the drawings were inspired by the dance costumes designed by Bauhaus stage director Oskar Schlemmer for *The Triadic Ballet* of 1922 **(Plate 1.10)** that Ávalos, Ochoa and Berman had seen represented only a few months back in 1986, in the Schlemmer retrospective at the San Diego Museum of Art.¹⁵⁵ Schlemmer’s stage performances that took place at Bauhaus festivals and parties were, like the BAW/TAF’s, also full of political satire, parody and humour that echoed Dadaesque irreverence.¹⁵⁶

As such, the aforementioned work of Group Material, Suzanne Lacy and the BAW/TAF all took place convivially around a table. In Southern California Moira Roth, an art historian who wrote extensively on the performance art scene in this region and taught at UCSD, nostalgically recalled that:

For me, so many of the acts of creating community in the seventies took place around food [...] conversations about ideas and politics[...] and evenings of plotting and strategizing, all leading to the creation of precious, fragile communities, and so often occurring in the context of food and eating.¹⁵⁷

In 1981, performance artist Linda Montano wrote in the journal *High Performance*—in which Gómez-Peña published frequently— an extensive article entitled ‘Food and Art’, specifically in relation to performance. The article included interviews with Lacy and

¹⁵³ Quoted in Günter Berghaus, ‘Towards an Avant-garde Performance Practice,’ p.31.

¹⁵⁴ Berghaus, ‘Towards an Avant-garde Performance Practice,’ p.31.

¹⁵⁵ This information was obtained from e-mail correspondence with artist David Ávalos on 31 May 2010

¹⁵⁶ Melissa Tringham, *The Theatre of the Bauhaus: The Modern and Postmodern Stage of Oskar Schlemmer* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 10-11.

¹⁵⁷ Moira Roth, ‘Introduction,’ in *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties*, ed. Linda M. Montano (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 146-147.

Barbara Smith, among others. For Montano, food could be used as a political statement, as a conceptual device and as a ritual.¹⁵⁸ It can also function as an important component of national identity. In fact prominent anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, has explored the relationship between cookbooks and national identity.¹⁵⁹ Similarly, anthropologist Mary Douglas maintains that food is '[...] an apt medium for purely social symbolism,'¹⁶⁰ and indeed the food that *The End of the Line* participants chose to share, corn—the main component of tortillas, a staple of Mexican diet up to this day—carries an important symbolic cultural dimension in the Americas. An indigenous crop of both Mexico and the U.S. and vital to pre-colonial diet, the Native Americans often called themselves the 'people of corn.'¹⁶¹ Spanish *conquistadores* unsuccessfully attempted to impose a wheat based diet as a substitute.¹⁶² The act of sharing and breaking corn across the table thus serves as a reminder of a pre-Columbian and borderless past that existed before artificial national barriers were erected.

In a similar vein to Roth, Jo-Anne Berelowitz, who has written extensively on the works of the BAW/TAF, has read *The End of the Line* in terms of both community and conviviality:

Gathering around a table and sharing food evokes family, the domestic, the home, a space of welcome and hospitality. If only for an afternoon, *The End of The Line* transformed a site of division and separate national identity into a borderless free way, a utopic zone of intercultural familial harmony.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁸ Linda Montano, 'Food and Art,' *High Performance* 4 (1981-1982): 45-54.

¹⁵⁹ Arjun Appadurai, 'How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30 (1998): 3.

¹⁶⁰ Mary Douglas, 'Food as a System of Communication,' in *In the Active Voice* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p.117.

¹⁶¹ Jeffrey M. Pilcher, 'Industrial Tortillas and Folkloric Pepsi: The Nutritional Consequences of Hybrid Cuisines in Mexico,' in *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating: A Reader*, ed. James L. Watson and Melissa L. Caldwell (Malden, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 237.

¹⁶² Jeffrey M. Pilcher, '*¡Que vivan los tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), p.3.

¹⁶³ Jo-Anne Berelowitz, 'The Space of Home in Chicano and Latino representations of the San Diego-Tijuana Borderlands (1968-2002),' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23 (2005): p. 335.

But although *The End of the Line* does evoke, as Berelowitz maintains, notions of ‘intercultural familial harmony’ and creates a ‘community around food’, as Roth also remembers, the performance simultaneously, in my view, carries out a more disruptive (and illicit) dimension. Here, it is important to recall that the performance artists were provocatively crossing the border illegally in broad daylight, close to a Border Patrol watchtower—an act that would be virtually impossible nowadays with the ever-increasing border security. In fact, a fence that extends onto the Pacific Ocean was built four years after this performance took place. The Border Patrol in this instance—that had more relaxed rules at the time—‘turned a blind eye’ and did not persecute any of the participants. Seen in this light, the BAW/TAF’s meal does produce a sense of community and conviviality but one that is couched in tension and conflict, foregrounding the political, social and economic problems of the region that were preoccupying artists working under the aegis of ‘new genre public art.’

Border Stereotypes? The Politics of Multiculturalism, *Rasquachismo* and the Carnavalesque

In her discussion of ‘new genre public art,’ Kwon observed a displacement of site-specificity by the ‘community-specific’ where ‘[...] the term “community” is associated with disenfranchised social groups that have been systematically excluded from the political and cultural processes that affect [...] their lives.’¹⁶⁴ In the case of *The End of the Line*, the members concentrated on those who were in some way affected by what they deemed to be the artificial division between Mexico and the U.S. through sharing a meal at the borderline itself. However, even though Kwon discusses at length new genre public art in relation to ‘disenfranchised social groups,’ she does not establish a clear link between the history of multiculturalism and identity politics to that of ‘new genre public art’ as it developed in the 1980s and 1990s. In contrast, my account of site-oriented practices in relation to ‘new genre public art’ factors in this component that heavily informed the practices of the BAW/TAF as well as, as I

¹⁶⁴ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p.112.

will discuss in the next chapter, the work of Gómez-Peña. In this section, as well as embedding the identity politics within the history of ‘new genre public art,’ I will look at how the BAW/TAF members responded to the politics of multiculturalism and investigated what they deemed to be ‘border stereotypes’ using the writings of both Deleuze and Guattari. I will then propose a reading of *The End of the Line* based on Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque.

The End of the Line can be seen as responding and opposing certain strands of multiculturalism that uncritically celebrated difference. Tariq Modood, who has written extensively on multiculturalism, succinctly defines multiculturalism as ‘[...] the political accommodation of minorities formed by immigration to western countries from outside the prosperous West.’¹⁶⁵ The politics of multiculturalism was first forged during the 1970s in relation to grassroots organisations that attempted to reorganise education for the benefit of minority students—the Chicano Blowouts and more generally, the civil rights movement, can be read as setting a tone for this trend.¹⁶⁶ The celebration of difference proposed as a policy by multiculturalism has by now undergone heavy criticism, notably by philosopher Slavoj Žižek. He argues that this policy has now been co-opted by the corporate world and put to the service of a neoliberalist agenda, thus becoming no more than a cog in the cultural machine of multinational capitalism. Žižek maintains that multiculturalism is the attitude with which ‘[...] from a kind of empty global position, treats each local culture the way the colonizer treats colonized people—as “natives” whose mores are to be carefully studied and “respected.”’¹⁶⁷ The BAW/TAF members clearly pointed to

¹⁶⁵ Tariq Modood, *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2007), p.5.

¹⁶⁶ Christopher Newfield and Avery F. Gordon, ‘Multiculturalism’s Unfinished Business,’ in *Mapping Multiculturalism*, ed. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp.76-98.

¹⁶⁷ Slavoj Žižek, ‘Multiculturalism, or, The Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism,’ *New Left Review* 1/225 (1997): 44.

In the visual arts, this critique can be clearly identified in the well-known show of 1990, *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*. The brochure of the exhibition stated ‘[...]Many artists of color [...] in their philosophical, aesthetic, and spiritual linkages to [...] precolonial societies [...] legitimize diversity [...]’ [Taken from George Yúdice, ‘Transnational Cultural Brokering of Art,’ in *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera (London: inIVA, 1995), p. 198].

multiculturalism's tendencies to iron out differences when they handed out a pamphlet during *The End of the Line*:

An electronic message board here spews out the deal that the government offers to immigrants from the south: We welcome you but first we must fingerprint you, interrogate you [...] We exempt you, we absolve you, we exonerate you. But only if you qualify for our benevolence...We forgive you, but first we must certify you, standardize you, normalize you [...] We want your dreams, we'll give you annual yields...We want your dreams, we'll give you the AMERICAN DREAM.¹⁶⁸

In this way, the BAW/TAF was pointing out that newcomers, in order to be integrated into the 'American dream' fabric, must first undergo a process of homogenisation and standardisation.

The BAW/TAF's response to the politics of multiculturalism is hardly surprising given the fact that that during the 1980s, there was a so-called 'Latino Boom,' a by-product of the politics of multiculturalism, that many have argued witnessed the packaging and marketing of the representation of difference in the United States.¹⁶⁹ Concomitantly, however, in the political rather than corporate sphere, the Reagan administration pressed to dismantle previous concessions attained by minority groups, such as the reversion of the Latino group's partially successful efforts to institute a bilingual education, as well as tightening immigration legislation.¹⁷⁰ In this way, the BAW/TAF's endeavours can be seen both as critiquing the celebration of difference, as the pamphlet indicates —whilst offering a more complex model of conviviality— and attacking the conservative trajectory of the decade.

The BAW/TAF's concern over the politics of multiculturalism was perhaps most clearly expressed with their engagement with 'border stereotypes' as materialised in the heavy costumes they wore for *The End of the Line*. Inspired by Schlemmer's designs, twelve of the participating artists wore costumes designed by Victor Ochoa and Sara Jo-Berman that were so large as to impose upon the most agile a slow, ungainly gait (**Plates 1.11, 1.12 and 1.13**). In the BAW/TAF's catalogue

¹⁶⁸ Kelley (ed.), *The Border Art Workshop (BAW/TAF) 1984-1989*, p.17.

¹⁶⁹ Yúdice, 'Transnational Cultural Brokering of Art,' p. 208.

¹⁷⁰ Yúdice, 'Transnational Cultural Brokering of Art,' pp. 199-200.

description of *The End of the Line* it is stated that the costumes were meant to represent 'border symbols.' The depiction of 'border symbols' or 'border stereotypes,' as the Workshop members liked to call them, was a recurrent practice in their artistic endeavours. Such 'border stereotypes' were clearly represented in a set of drawings of bingo or *lotería*¹⁷¹ cards made by Victor Ochoa in 1986, which appeared in the BAW/TAF's first five-year retrospective catalogue, and were the basis for these costumes (**Plates 1.14 and 1.15**). Founder of the Bauhaus school Walter Gropius has adequately described Schlemmer's costumes as 'moving architecture.'¹⁷²

Like Schlemmer's designs, the costumes of *The End of the Line* were highly sculptural, almost like three dimensional paper dolls and, at the expense of facilitating mobility, the most voluminous parts were intended for the participant's mid-section. As Kwon pointed out, instead of placing themselves within the history of public art, it was not uncommon for collective groups of the 1980s to cite the historical avant-garde as their point of departure. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, editors of the book *Collectivism after Modernism*, argue that the collective groups that emerged after World War II recognised the utopic pitfalls of the earlier vanguard and although they also embraced the heterogeneous aspects of collective groups, they instead structured themselves around 'decentred and fluctuating identities.'¹⁷³ Asco member Gronk also expressed kinship with historical avant-garde practices claiming that he felt an affinity to the Dadaists '[...] who were also social critics of their particular moment in time and observers of what was taking place within culture.'¹⁷⁴ Stimson's and Sholette's argument chimes with art historian and critic Jeff Kelley's argument in his essay 'Crossed Places', written for the first BAW/TAF catalogue, a retrospective of the first five years of the Workshop. Kelley claimed that the:

¹⁷¹ Although both bingo and the Mexican *lotería* game work on the same principle, the Mexican *lotería* cards have characters like "death" or "the drunk" instead of numbers. The dealer uses a deck of cards, instead of numbers written on bingo ping-pong balls, to call randomly the characters.

¹⁷² Walter Gropius, 'Introduction,' in *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, ed. Walter Gropius and Arthur S. Wensinger, trans. Arthur S. Wensinger (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961), p. 9.

¹⁷³ Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, 'Introduction: Periodizing Collectivism,' in *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination After 1945*, ed. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p.10.

¹⁷⁴ Quoted in McCaughan, *Art and Social Movements*, p.128.

BAW/TAF's members are de-facto-futurists, but of a kind measured by the failure of previous futurisms [...whilst] BAW/TAF members, are motivated toward social engagement through their works—and thereby romantic and utopian to that degree—they are neither social nor esthetic idealists, basing their practice, instead, upon the particular, pragmatic, and ever-changing conditions of specific places; more like anthropologists than architects.¹⁷⁵

Indeed, like many of artists of 'new genre public art,' the BAW/TAF's working methods echoed many of the strategies employed by the historical avant-garde. This is not only evident from the inspiration that they took from Schlemmer's designs but also, as I will discuss later on, they produced journals that took inspiration from the interest in typography of the likes of Laszlo-Moholy Nagy's work. In addition, they created a similar 'interactive' space to, for instance, the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, where members presented lectures, poetry, performances, *inter alia*, and discussed what they believed were the most pressing social and political problems. When Cabaret Voltaire opened in 1916, Hugo Ball claimed that it was meant as a 'centre for artistic entertainment [...] with daily meetings where visiting artists will perform their music and poetry. The younger artists of Zurich are invited to bring along their ideas and contributions.'¹⁷⁶

Schlemmer's designs were appropriated and adjusted to represent what the BAW/TAF members called 'border stereotypes.' In their meetings, one of the most often-discussed concerns was what they identified as pernicious 'border stereotypes' that were vividly depicted in the aforementioned *lotería* cards. According to these cards, each of the performers at *The End of the Line* represented a 'border symbol.' The binoculars stood for 'La Migra' (the border patrol); the boot for 'El Marine'; the camera for 'La Turista' (the tourist); the lipstick for 'La Fácil' (the easy woman); the Clorox bottle for 'La Criada' (the maid); the car for 'El Taxi,' with the word coyote (a

¹⁷⁵ Jeff Kelley, 'Crossed Places,' in *The Border Art Workshop (BAW/TAF) 1984-1989*, ed. Jeff Kelley (San Diego: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988), p.19.

¹⁷⁶ Quoted in Günter Berghaus, 'Towards an Avant-garde Performance Practice, 1896-1919,' in *Avant-garde Performance: Live Events and Electronic Technologies* (New York and Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 40.

slang term for the guides leading migrants across the border) inscribed on it; and 'El Nopal,' a type of cacti but also a denigratory term used to refer to the people of 'lower-middle class,' usually from the countryside.¹⁷⁷ Also included are 'El Obispo' (the bishop) who had the slogan 'Have Fear I'm Here' written on the back of the costume, and 'El Vato'—the man with the big Pendleton shirt—a Chicano colloquialism for Latino youths, equivalent to 'dude,' sometimes used derogatively. Victor Ochoa and David Ávalos were present but busy installing several props for the performance. Many people, who were not formally part of the Workshop, such as Michael Schnorr's students from Southwestern College in San Diego, also participated in this performance.

Two other costumes present at *The End of the Line* that were not represented by the set of *lotería* cards produced by Victor Ochoa (**Plate 1.16**) are the lock that stands for 'La Punk,' played by Rebecca Koch, and the big pants that represent 'El Surf.' Yet these are included in a slightly different version of the cards. One character appearing in the performance, but not represented on either set of cards, is 'El Indio' (the Indian), played by Native American artists James Luna and represented by a Kumeyaay drum with a feather on the side. However, a year later, Ochoa made a painting using the same format of the other two drawings entitled *Border Bingo/Lotería Fronteriza* depicting 'El Indio' as dressed during this 1986 performance.

According to an interview I carried out with David Ávalos, *The End of the Line* offered a small storyline guiding the performance that included all the characters: 'La Migra' was there permanently scanning the border; 'El Surf,' in his big swim trunks, was on his way to catch the waves in Baja California; 'El Taxi' was transporting 'illegal aliens' to the other side of the border; 'La Tourista' was on her way to take some pictures of Tijuana; 'El Marine' was going to Cahuilla, just north of Tijuana, to the red light district where 'La Fácil' was waiting for him; 'La Punk' was just hanging around the American side of the border whereas 'El Vato' had just began his journey of

¹⁷⁷ This information was obtained from e-mail correspondence with artist David Ávalos on 15 May 2010 as well as from an interview with Michael Schnorr on 9 April 2010.

discovery on the Mexican side; 'El Obispo' was about to baptize Indians by force while 'El Indio' repeatedly called the border his home.¹⁷⁸

Shortly I will discuss the deeply ambivalent nature of the 'border stereotypes,' but for now it is worth pointing out that these were comical figures, far from conventional symbols of the border, akin to political cartoons—distorted caricatures of the loathsome nature of ethnic stereotyping—rather than incarnations of jingoistic sentiments about the binational divide. Still, the elementary storyline weaving together the border characters in the *The End of the Line*, as they trudge along the beach in their crippling costumes, seem to encourage an iconographic reading. This is almost prescribed in Victor Ochoa's *lotería* cards that seem to provide a 'symbol handbook' for reading the performance and the costumes—not to mention the motif of congregating for a convivial meal. *The End of the Line* resonates strongly with feminist artists Judy Chicago's 1979 installation *The Dinner Party* (**Plate 1.17**) where, on a triangular table, she set dinner places for thirty-nine famed women, both mythical and historical, ranging from Sappho to Georgia O'Keefe. The table contained ceramic plates with symbolic motifs commemorating the women who, according to Chicago, had fallen into a pit of historical amnesia. This installation attempted to retell the history of Western civilization, one that acknowledged that women were an integral part of it.¹⁷⁹ When the work was exhibited, the viewer had to read the accompanying brochure to find out which of the celebrated women were represented at the table. Chicago even published a book, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of our Heritage*, focusing on the plates and detailing the history of the women represented.¹⁸⁰

Many critics denounced this work as kitsch, attacking her reliance on iconography, as well as the interdependence between text and image in the installation.¹⁸¹ But this 'aesthetic' was in synch with the feminist performance art

¹⁷⁸ E-mail correspondence with artist David Ávalos on 15 May 2010.

¹⁷⁹ Anette Kubitz, 'Rereading the Readings of *The Dinner Party* in Europe,' in *Sexual Politics: Judy's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 151-152.

¹⁸⁰ Carol Snyder, 'Reading the Language of "The Dinner Party",' *Woman's Art Journal* 1 (1980-1981): 30-34.

¹⁸¹ Amelia Jones, 'The "Sexual Politics" of *The Dinner Party*: A Critical Context,' in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 87-89.

scene in California that emerged in the 1970s that also operated as a set of collaborations. Indeed, the early 1970s witnessed the inception of the term 'performance art' that was later retroactively applied to Happenings and Fluxus events. It was tightly intertwined with the emergence of feminist artists such as Chicago and was used to describe time-based and ephemeral artworks that paid particular attention to corporeal experience.¹⁸² Chicago, together with artist Miriam Schapiro, ran the feminist programme at the California Institute of Arts where Gómez-Peña obtained an MFA in 1978.

Both feminists and Chicanos employed many aesthetic techniques that were often considered 'decorative' such as ceramics and embroidery that attempted to flout conventions of the established art world.¹⁸³ Likewise, the artistic practice of the BAW/TAF radically departed from dominant aesthetic conventions especially visible in their brightly coloured costumes made out of cheap foam. Art historian Meiling Cheng, who has written extensively on performance art in Southern California, points out that this 'kitsch' aesthetic was commonplace in performance art of the decade and region. She stated that 'The majority of performance projects in L.A. are low-tech, performer-centered, concept- or process-oriented, "poor theater" pieces—distinctly antithetical to the sleek finesse and technological ingenuity of the city's blockbuster films.'¹⁸⁴ The BAW/TAF's aesthetics can also be read with what art historian Hal Foster denominates 'anti-aesthetics' that, he explains, is a postmodernist tendency to question and 'destructure' normative forms of representation that is sometimes rooted in the vernacular in order to '[...] deny the idea of a privileged aesthetic realm.'¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² Robyn Brenato, 'Outside the Frame: Performance, Art, and Life,' in *Outside the Frame: Performance and the Object: A Survey History of Performance Art in the USA Since 1950*, ed. Gary Sangster (Cleveland: Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 1994), p. 32.

¹⁸³ Rose Lee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p. 129.

¹⁸⁴ Meiling Cheng, *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2002), p.16.

¹⁸⁵ Hal Foster, 'Introduction,' in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1998), pp. xvi-xvii.

Gómez-Peña asserted that much of the style of Latin American artists is viewed as anachronistic, but turned the implicit negative judgement around, by arguing 'We come from a culture which doesn't venerate [...] the principle of newness.'¹⁸⁶ This statement in itself is an example of the type of hackneyed ideas about the border that the Workshop was trying to dissolve but, undoubtedly, the Workshop placed an emphasis on unpacking and recycling the past. Dr Thomas Ybarra-Frausto, probably the most notable art historian associated with Chicano culture and art, coined the term *rasquache* (a Spanish term that denominates objects of bad quality or scant value) in the early 1980s that has often been associated with the visual style and 'under-dog' perspective of Chicano and Latin American artists, which aptly describes the attitude of the BAW/TAF's work and it is therefore a useful term to retain. Ybarra-Frausto claims that:

To be *rasquache* is to be unfettered and unrestrained, to favor the elaborate over the simple, the flamboyant over the severe. Bright colors [...] are preferred to sombre, high intensity to low, the shimmering and sparking to the muted and subdued [...] Ornamentation and elaboration prevail [...] Paradoxically, although elaboration is preferred to understatement, high value is placed on making do, *hacer rendir las cosas* [to make the best of what one has...] Things are not thrown away, they are saved and recycled, often in different contexts.¹⁸⁷

Rasquachismo deliberately goes against the grain of the 'cleaner' minimalist aesthetic—also a goal of feminists such as Chicago—often showcased in Western museums and galleries. According to Ybarra-Frausto, *rasquachismo* is an irreverent and impertinent posture that is always attempting to spoof convention and militate against protocol through parody; and yet, while doing so, it tends almost paradoxically to court several deep-seated traditions of Mexican popular culture. An example

¹⁸⁶ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, 'Minimum Budget, Maximum Quality: An Interview with Guillermo Gómez-Peña,' in *The Border Art Workshop (BAW/TAF) 1984-1989*, ed. Jeff Kelley (San Diego: La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1988), p.57.

¹⁸⁷ Thomas Ybarra-Frausto, 'The Chicano Movement/ The Movement of Chicano Art,' in *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera (London: inIVA, 1995), p.172.

already mentioned is the *lotería*, a game that was introduced in the 18th century by the Spaniards.¹⁸⁸

Unlike a theatrical production, the characters of *The End of the Line* do not have a long and complex narrative. Each character does have a small role to play but there seems to be only an elementary storyline¹⁸⁹ that provides a connection between them. The twelve border characters are little more than histrionic *lotería* figures. They float almost isolated in the performance—unsurprisingly and deliberately so, as the figures come from different eras spanning centuries, from how Catholicism was established in the Americas, personified by the bishop trying to baptize a native, to more contemporary circumstances, portrayed by characters such as the surfer and the punk. The performance carries with it the politically abrasive unrehearsed trait of the *carpa*, one that often lampoons already-known public and historic figures, but without intricate plots. Additionally, most of the characters of the performance do not personify conventional stereotypes of the border: are the viewers supposed to connect the surfer, the bishop, the prostitute, or the punk, with the borderlands? Not so. In fact, in order to identify the characters in *The End of the Line* I had to look at Ochoa's *lotería* cards and drew extensively from the interview I carried out with Ávalos. But would these characters be recognized by those living on/ at the border?

It comes as no surprise that the BAW/TAF members, working in the mid 1980s, grounded were interested in the development of post-structuralism. In the 1986 edition of the journal *The Broken Line*, Gómez-Peña expressed his interest in the possibility of '[...]redefining certain conceptions that exist in the border region,' adding that 'there exists so many wrong and mystified ideas about what the border means, and one of the functions that I am interested in developing within a cultural activity, is redefining them.'¹⁹⁰ In a similar note, David Ávalos claimed in an article for *Uptown* in March 1986 that the purpose of the BAW/TAF was '[...] to create a new way of presenting images about the border that are able to break the mould of stereotypes

¹⁸⁸ Alberto Ruy Sánchez, 'Estética de la Suerte,' *Artes de México: El Arte de la Suerte* 13 (1991): 22.

¹⁸⁹ See above David Ávalos account of the underlying storyline in *The End of the Line* given in the interview I carried out with him.

¹⁹⁰ Marco Vinicio González and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, 'Diálogos Fronterizos,' in *The Broken Line/La Línea Quebrada* 1 (1986): unpaginated.

and allow people to view the region in a socially conscious way.’¹⁹¹ This aim can be traced back to Asco’s political project. Herrón maintained that Asco’s aims included ‘[...] representing something that was different, approaching art, differently [...] by] trying to come up with new symbols.’¹⁹²

Emily Hicks and Gómez-Peña wrote extensive theoretical texts on the Mexico-U.S. border that elucidate the meaning behind the BAW/TAF’s ambiguous ‘border stereotypes.’ They based their writings on the theories of Deleuze and Guattari, and precociously so, as their philosophical works were not as widely popularised in American academia as they are now.¹⁹³ Although Hicks was not formally part of the Workshop until 1987, she had been involved with it at least a year earlier and was present at *The End of the Line*. In the 1987 edition of the BAW/TAF’s journal entitled *The Broken Line*, in an essay entitled ‘What the Broken Line is Not,’ Hicks claimed that the border culture is a desiring-machine, in the sense postulated by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972).¹⁹⁴ She proceeds to list several parts of the machine such as the ‘pollo’ or border-crosser, the coyote who illegally smuggles ‘pollos,’ and other characters that roughly correspond to those present in *The End of the Line*.¹⁹⁵

The 1987 article is short, giving Hicks no space to labour upon the border desiring- machine, but in her 1991 book *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* she picks up many of the loose threads. Hicks argues that ‘border writing’ underscores the differences in reference codes between two or more cultures. Hicks insists that the reader might not understand all the reference codes given, and indeed the characters of *The End of the Line* are not easily discernible. But as a result, a sense of ‘deterritorialization of signification’ is experienced where meanings are under

¹⁹¹ Michael J. Williams, ‘Border Unifies, Divides Two Cultures,’ *Uptown San Diego*, March 1986, vol. 2, Arts Section.

¹⁹² Quoted in Benavidez, *Gronk*, p.40.

¹⁹³ I am by no means arguing that Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Emily Hicks were the sole architects of the theoretical foundation of the Workshop, but these two members *wrote* the most extensive texts on the subject in an attempt to validate the BAW/TAF’s activist trajectory.

¹⁹⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (London: Continuum, 2004).

¹⁹⁵ Emily Hicks, ‘What the Broken Line is Not,’ in *The Broken Line/La Línea Quebrada* 2 (1987): unpaginated.

continual transformation.¹⁹⁶ Summarizing the notion of the desiring-machine, Hicks claims that it is a metaphorical system of interruptions and breaks, always interconnected with other desiring-machines, each machine having its own set of codes. She illustrates this by claiming that the 'border machine' is 'subject to "flows" that depend on the labor needs of California growers; its codes are continually changing, as they are connected to and determined by the political and juridical machines of Washington and Mexico City.'¹⁹⁷

According to this model, the 'stereotyped' characters of *The End of the Line* make up part of the border cultural machine that churns out a variety of often typified subjectivities. These characters are themselves subject to change and renewal especially, as Hicks iterates, via the scrambling of existing codes. However, in my opinion, art conceived as a desiring-machine, with the potential to short-circuiting the mechanisms of racial stereotypes, is an optimistic model—it risks falling into the pitfalls of utopianism—but one that applies to the BAW/TAF's work, justifies their interventions in the socio-political fabric of the borderlands and more crucially, offers valuable strategies for disarming racial stereotypes.

Pushing for the scrambling of existing codes, the Workshop's members equated cultural hybridity with the intermingling of a variety of art forms. In his article 'Border Culture and Deterritorialization' for the 1987 edition of *The Broken Line*, Gómez-Peña asserts that: 'Every day [...] cities like Tijuana [...] become models of a new hybrid culture [...] and border youth, *les 'cholo-punks' terribles*, children of the mysterious crack that opens between the First and the Third world [...].'¹⁹⁸ The term hybridity was not widely used until it was adopted in postcolonial studies during the 1990s, a few years later than Gómez-Peña's statement. Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin in his 1981 book *The Dialogic Imagination*—expounding on the cross-fertilization of two or more languages—was one of the first theorists to dislodge

¹⁹⁶ Emily Hicks, *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. xxiii-xxx.

¹⁹⁷ Hicks, *Border Writing*, p. xxvi.

¹⁹⁸ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, 'Border Culture and Deterritorialization,' in *The Broken Line/ La Línea Quebrada* 2 (1987): unpaginated.

hybridity from its strict biological meaning.¹⁹⁹ Hicks did refer to Bakhtin's theories in *Border Writing*²⁰⁰ and I would argue that similar ideas were circulated within the Workshop's circle.²⁰¹

Taking my cue from Bakhtin's writings, I want to propose an alternative—though by no means incompatible—reading to Hicks and Peña's writings regarding the 'stereotyped' characters of *The End of the Line*. For this I will start by unpacking the definition of stereotypes, drawing on the work of postcolonial theorists like Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha. This reading, perhaps equally optimistic to Hicks', relies not so much on dislodging the signifier from the signified in stereotypes but, instead, in understanding *The End of the Line* as an attempt to disturb the normal fabric of everyday life by effectively staging a counterhegemonic carnival and, more generally, by creating havoc in the public arena. It is worth noting that during this time Bakhtin's approach attracted renewed attention. For theorist John Docker, who has written extensively on postmodernism and popular culture, the practice of questioning aesthetic hierarchies—like *rasquachismo* does—gained momentum in the 1970s and particularly in the 1980s, sparking a renewed interest in Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque.²⁰² Similarly, literary theorist Ihab Hassan has drawn a relationship between Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque and postmodernist logic, maintaining that the term 'carnivalization': '[...] is Bakhtin's and it riotously embraces indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, selflessness, irony, hybridization [...] But the term also conveys the comic or absurdist ethos of postmodernism anticipated

¹⁹⁹ Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), p.128.

²⁰⁰ In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin states: 'What we are calling a hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs [...] to a single speaker, but that actually contains mixed within it two utterance [...] two "languages," two semantic and axiological belief systems.' [Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.304.]

²⁰¹ Kraidy, *Hybridity or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*, pp.51-52.

²⁰² John Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: The Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 169.

in the “heteroglossia” of Rabelais [...] what Bakhtin calls [...] carnival [...] might stand for postmodernism itself.’²⁰³

Postcolonial author Homi Bhabha in his complex essay ‘The Other Question’, first published in 1983, writes that a stereotype is not only a ‘false representation of reality’²⁰⁴ but that it ‘[...] requires for its successful signification, a continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes.’²⁰⁵ Bhabha’s notion of ‘chain of stereotypes’ is not unlike Hicks’ statement that desire-machines exist and depend on an interconnected web of other desiring-machines. Bhabha further claims that this chain is a ‘[...]particular “fixated” form of the colonial subject which facilitates colonial relations, and sets up a discursive form of racial and cultural opposition in terms of which colonial power is exercised.’²⁰⁶ Similarly, cultural theorist Stuart Hall stated that a stereotype ‘reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes “difference”’²⁰⁷ and adds that ‘[...]stereotyping [...] is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between the “normal” and the “deviant” [...] what “belongs” and what does not or is “Other”[...]’²⁰⁸ Based on these two descriptions, stereotypes depend on repetition and fixity for their perpetuation and the characters of *The End of the Line*—based on Schlemmer’s utopic and dramatic designs but revamped in order to make them relevant to the Mexico-U.S. border context—do not blindly repeat these stereotypes but rather distort them. Such representations fail to summon for their referents and in this way, by refusing to repeat and represent conventional stereotypes of the border, such characters instead destabilise the chain of stereotypes that Bhabha describes.

In *Rabelais and his World*, written during the 1930s, Bakhtin describes the carnival festivities of the Middle Ages, which had parody as their locus (not dissimilarly to the *teatro de carpa*). Carnivals for Bakhtin were a collective mockery of

²⁰³ Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987) p.171.

²⁰⁴ Homi Bhabha, ‘The Other Question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism,’ in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 107.

²⁰⁵ Bhabha, ‘The Other Question,’ p. 110.

²⁰⁶ Bhabha, ‘The Other Question,’ p. 112.

²⁰⁷ Stuart Hall, ‘The Spectacle of the “Other,”’ in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997), p.258.

²⁰⁸ Hall, ‘The Spectacle of the “Other,”’ p.258.

officialdom; they were, to use Ybarra-Frausto's terms, *rasquache*. Bakhtin claims that the carnival '[...] Celebrated temporal liberation [...] from the established order [...] it marked suspension of all hierarchical rank [...] carnival was the feast of [...] change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.'²⁰⁹ Counterhegemonic systems, carnivals were arenas populated by monsters, clowns and fools that at once performed and incarnated the social ailments and also provided the general public with a democratising forum for political subversion of the established order. The 'fool' as a 'border symbol' is emblematic of rebellion, as literature professor and art curator Faye Ran puts it: 'The fool will contradict, oppose or distort normative systems and ideologies.'²¹⁰ In fact, in my view, these 'border symbols' stem out of the BAW/TAF's own fabricated mythology, inspired by Mexican and American popular culture, one that is only partially rooted on actively circulating clichés about the border and that, for the most part, represents a dystopia where cultural stereotypes have ran amok, finding themselves warped almost beyond recognition.

The notion that the characters of *The End of the Line* are 'monsters and fools' that attempt to create havoc not only with the representation of 'border stereotypes' but, more generally, on the discursive practices that uphold the power imbalances of the region, resonates with prominent Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa's claim, in her by now seminal book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), that:

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* [border crossers] live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half

²⁰⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), p.10.

²¹⁰ Faye Ran, 'Modern Tragicomedy and the Fool,' in *Clowns, Fools and Picares: Popular Forms in Theatre, Fiction and Film*, ed. David Robb (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), p. 27.

dead: in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal.' ²¹¹

The 'squint-eyed,' 'perverse' creatures that Anzaldúa so vividly portrays are not only consonant with Bakhtin's carnivalesque characters, but poetically describe the warped representation of stereotypes that the members of the Workshop created. As such, these 'border stereotypes' are in actuality monsters, not only because of their exaggerated appearance and their 'troublesome' nature, but also in the original sense of the word that etymologically stems from the Latin *monstrum*, derived from the root *monere* (to warn). In short, these exaggerated creatures forewarn against the possibility of a bleak future, marred by ethnic and cultural stereotypes.²¹²

Questioning the Nation-State: Recycling Binational History

During *The End of the Line* the spectators of the performance could hear in the background Guillermo Gómez-Peña's voice, reciting one of his nebulous poems woven in both English and Spanish, lamenting 'History is a shattered puzzle/ Traditions are ruins.'²¹³ At the same time, in a lower tone, almost as a murmur, a radio was delivering a bogus newscast made by the Workshop members (not unlike Lacy's aforementioned radio broadcast that framed her performance *Whisper, The Waves, the Wind*, of 1984). A female narrator meanwhile described how the performance was unfolding and, pointing to a central aim of the BAW/TAF, asked 'Will art prove once more the artificiality of the border?'²¹⁴

Notions of the nation-state as coherent and bounded entities were of particular interest to the members of the BAW/TAF. During the 1980s, several U.S. universities and colleges located in the South West—such as New Mexico State University—

²¹¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera/The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/ Aunt Lutte, 1987), p.3.

²¹² Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.13.

²¹³ David Ávalos provided this poem to me via e-mail correspondence on the 18th of May 2010. This was a preliminary version so it is likely that the actual poem read aloud on the day of *The End of the Line* had a few modifications. According to Ávalos, Gómez-Peña was away in Spain when most of the planning for *The End of the Line* took place.

²¹⁴ Quote taken from the aforementioned video clip provided to me by Michael Schnorr.

started offering students courses that zoomed in on Mexico and US ‘border studies’, largely as a result of the increasing attention paid to economic and cultural globalisation as well as a general tendency to question monolithic notions of nationhood.²¹⁵ As I mentioned in the introduction, such debates were catalysed and enriched by the writings of professor of International Studies Benedict Anderson who, in 1983, published his seminal book *Imagined Communities*. In this book he argued that since citizens do not know all their fellow-members within their nation-state, the nation-state itself becomes an ‘imagined political community’ put under the service of ideology and nationalism.²¹⁶

A year after *The End of the Line*, for a related installation entitled *Border Fence as Möbius Strip* (**Plate 1.18**), David Ávalos took a 50-foot chain link fence and cut it into a möbius strip which he suspended from the ceiling effectively creating a model of how the members conceived the borderlands. Ávalos claimed:

Since a möbius strip has only one side, you could pass through this fence from one side to the same side. There was no other side! The idea was to present a physical model that defies our intuition—a new model for looking at the border. Even though there’s a fence separating us, maybe we’re actually on the same side of history, the same side of human need [...] ²¹⁷

This installation was made for the exhibition *Border Realities III* of February 1987 alongside another room that showcased many of the props for *The End of the Line*. Möbius strips continuous one-sided surfaces are *non-orientable*. They are made from a rectangular strip in which one end is rotated 180 degrees and attached to the other end. Thus it bears a relationship to the table at *The End of the Line*, which was also rotated 180 degrees. We can claim that the table at the performance acted as a compass gone awry, impossible to orient, trying to shed the viewer’s bearings so a

²¹⁵ Tirza True Latimer, ‘Art on the Borderline,’ in *The Impact of Globalization on the United States: Culture and Society*, ed. Michelle Bertho (Westport and London: Praeger Perspectives, 2008), p. 164.

²¹⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 6.

²¹⁷ Ávalos’ statement in Scott Kessler, ‘Imagine No Borders: Interview with an Artist,’ in *Borderthink! A Survival Guide for the Bush Era*, ed. Monty Reed Kroopkin (San Diego: New Indicator Collective at U.C.S.D., 1989), p. 23.

new conception of this geopolitical space could emerge, one that defied geographical intuition and that, like the Möbius' strip, only had one side. Seen from this perspective, the line never ends since it is circular—it does not act as a divide because it has no natural partition to begin with.²¹⁸ As such, Ávalos work proposes a more positive border imaginary, one that goes against 'the inside and outside' topology that dominates most normative definitions of borders. This model that proposes a different way of representing the border is particularly potent for, as Étienne Balibar has observed 'the task of democratizing borders' implies 'that their representation' should be desacralized.'²¹⁹

This logic, anchored in disorientation, is also present in their written journals and articles. From their first journal to both their five- and seven-year catalogue retrospectives, the format of the various BAW/TAF publications had remained largely unchanged.²²⁰ The format of this journal can be ultimately traced back to typographical experiments predominantly carried out in the 1920s and 1930s in Northern Europe that questioned typographical conventions. According to Robin Kiross, who has written amply on the history of typography, such experiments provided a common link between the diverse motivations of Italian Futurists, Russian Constructivists and Dadaists. Kiross further maintains that 'Their interest in graphic and typographic design thus took its place as part of a concern with the whole of the humanly constructed world.'²²¹ Both social considerations and the breaking away from normative 'constructed worlds' were expressed by, among others, printing text of different sizes, colours and styles, not in horizontal lines but diagonally, vertically or in an almost chaotic configuration on the page. In this way, their ideas were not only expressed by text but through form. Typographer Jan Tschichold's seminal handbook entitled *Die Neue Typographie* of 1928 crucially claimed that this new

²¹⁸ The relationship between *The End of the Line* and *Border Fence as Möbius Strip* was pointed out to me by David Ávalos in an email of 18 May 2010.

²¹⁹ Étienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. James Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 113.

²²⁰ The third edition of *The Broken Line*, which falls outside the BAW/TAF period examined in this essay, differed from the previous ones in that it consists of a box and contains several fluorescent pamphlets with satirical drawings (often relating to popular culture) and quotes.

²²¹ Robin Kiross, *Modern Typography: An Essay in Critical History* (London: Hyphen Press, 1992), p. 86.

typography was meant to awaken readers from a passive state and encourage active, critical and participatory readings. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's 1925 book *Painting, Photography, Film* is exemplar of this trend.²²²

Similarly, The BAW/TAF retrospectives consisted of quotes relating to the border; fragments of news reporting; heartbreaking stories of individual 'pollos'; pictures of the BAW/TAF's work with scant or no descriptions; satirical political cartoons, poems and writings including some by their members (particularly Gómez Peña); and satirical drawings relating to popular culture. Most long texts are written in both English and Spanish but others remain without translation. Disorienting and confusing the reader at times the translations are *not* placed alongside each other, and the reader has to flip through the pages to find it in the other language. Many of the texts are printed diagonally or horizontally—even bisecting the text so the reader only sees a fragment of it (**Plates 1.19, 1.20 and 1.21**). If, as Hicks claims, border writing should induce a sense of deterritorialization, then *The Broken Line* and the retrospectives are examples *par excellence*: the reader is utterly lost in this mélange that constantly requires rotating the journal in order to read it; and also lost in translation, unable to shift from different cultural codes and different genres of writing and viewing.²²³ The required haphazard mode of viewing and reading their publications goes hand in hand with my earlier argument that the 'border symbols' that the Workshop members created generated a sense of deterritorialization of signification. Both in their performances and in their written works the members created a visual labyrinth that would throw the viewer into a vortex of confusion. This condition of 'lost-ness' served to unhinge border culture from spatial specificity.

For the members of the Workshop, the term 'deterritorialization' that both Hicks and Gómez-Peña wrote about, did not only apply to the realm of signification, as Hicks' Deleuzian argument maintained, but also to the anthropological register, prompting a disengagement between culture and place. In 1989 Isaac Artenstein, another of the original members of the BAW/TAF, produced a short video entitled *My*

²²² For more information see Frederic J. Schwartz, 'The Eye of the Expert: Walter Benjamin and the Avant Garde,' in *Art History* 24 (2001): 401-444.

²²³ Kiross, *Modern Typography*, pp.85-97.

Other Self/Mi Otro Yo that showcased many of the BAW/TAF's works. Among these was Ávalos *Lotería Chicana* mentioned above. In this work, alongside the text of 'this was Mexico before the robbery' there was a wheel, with a compass in the middle of it, surrounded by *lotería* images such as *el corazón* (the heart), *el valiente* (the brave one), and *la mano* (the hand), which the viewer could spin.²²⁴ In Artenstein's video, this work was shown with the wheel spinning while the compass in its middle remained still. At the same time, Gómez-Peña in the voiceover claimed: 'In 1848 when the axis of the continent shifted overnight and South became North in the blink of an eye people began migrating in reverse [...]' The Workshop members wished to create a model whereby the borderlands would extend throughout both countries—not only to the borderline—releasing each territory from the grasp of stringent political demarcations, thus placing Mexico and the U.S. on the same side of history, a history capable of acknowledging that the two countries share a hybrid culture. In 1987 Gómez-Peña claimed that he dreamt of 'the "borderization" of the world.'²²⁵

I would also like to add to Gómez-Peña's account that the members were looking not only for a sense of deterritorialization, but also for a sense of temporal dislocation. Hicks claims in her book that border writers can give the reader the possibility of practicing a 'multidimensional perception of nonsynchronous memory.'²²⁶ Returning to *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin draws an important distinction between the feast and the carnival. Any official celebration of Columbus Day would be considered a feast, as it commemorates and sometimes re-creates a moment in the past, attempting to perpetuate it in history. According to Bakhtin '[...] the official feast looked back at the past to consecrate the present. The carnival, the feast's mischievous cousin, tried to celebrate the '[...] temporal liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order.'²²⁷ The carnival is antagonistic to everything that is immortalized. It is a *rasquache* attitude, recycling everything in its path—the performance's similarity to the itinerant *carpas* and the expendable

²²⁴ Philip Brookman, 'Conversations at Café Mestizo: The Public Art of David Avalos,' in *Café Mestizo*, ed. Philip Brookman (New York: Intar Gallery, 1989), pp. 14-15.

²²⁵ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, 'Border Culture and Deterritorialization,' unpaginated.

²²⁶ Hicks, *Border Writing*, p. xxiii.

²²⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 9-10.

costumes made out of cheap foam, go hand in hand with the Workshop's view that the Americas' colonialist past and neocolonialist present could be written anew. Going back to the importance of recycling, David Ávalos' *Möbius Strip* is paradigmatic of this different temporality of the nation-state: it is a cyclical, an infinite structure, that allows subjects to perform and *re*-recount the history of the nation.

Although Homi Bhabha did not write his influential essay 'DissemiNation' until 1991, some of the terms he used in it aptly capture the contestation of the nation-state that the Workshop members articulated. In this essay, Bhabha makes a distinction between the pedagogical and the performative temporalities of the nation-state, both of which participate in the formation of national subjectivities. The first, and the one which the feast is mobilised against, relies on the nation as a narrative strategy, constructing time as a form of linear accumulation that is told by an 'apparatus of power'²²⁸ to subjects as pedagogical objects. The second, more akin to the carnival, is repetitive; it is a more *active* form of narration where subjects perform and *re*-recount the history of the nation, allowing for a disjunctive rendering of temporality that opens up a potential emancipatory plane. It is in this second sense that *The End of the Line* participates in.

The 'carnival' of the *The End of the Line* is enacted as a contestation of the Columbus Day 'feast,' when the continent was purportedly 'discovered.' Argentine semiotician Walter Mignolo has succinctly captured the problem with the notion of the 'discovery' of America by writing that '[...] there was no America to be discovered in the first place, and, for those who were already living in the lands where Columbus arrived without knowing where he was, there was nothing to be discovered at all.'²²⁹ Debates surrounding the 'discovery' of America were particularly polemical during this time due to the Quincentenary Jubilee Commission—created by the United States Congress in 1984—that was planning the festivities of the so-called 'New World' in

²²⁸ Homi Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern tradition,' in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p.292.

²²⁹ Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.101.

1992. The celebration would include, among other things, \$5 million dollars worth of touring replicas of Columbus' three caravels²³⁰ in his first voyage across the ocean.²³¹

For *The End of the Line*, the members placed three cardboard boats close to the beach, that were later ignited as a symbolic gesture that confronted U.S. forms of neo-colonialism and alluded to Columbus' three caravels used during the conquest (**Plate 1.22**). Importantly, these boats also navigated through different epochs: the first was a simple boat with one sail, the second a more elaborate version of the first with three sails, and the last one, an imposing modern tanker bearing a flag at its top.²³² Similarly, the costumes invoked different epochs, representing numerous historical epochs including the time when the Spanish conquistadores came to America and brought with them Catholicism—the 'representation' of the Last Supper—to the present surveillance of the border and Tijuana's image as the playground for American tourists—'El Marine' visiting 'La Fácil.' In this way, the performance set a correlation between traditional colonialism and contemporary neo-colonialism, which witnesses other nuanced forms of oppression, including the military presence in the border. My argument is that the performance sets out to radically erase linear, chronological, narratives as signalled by the boats set on fire. These boats—sequentially arranged—do not only stand in for different historical periods but also for the manner in which history is told (and which the feast is mobilised against) as a form of linear accumulation that attempts to turn the nation-state into the telos of history, naturalising its existence. *The End of the Line* is set up more as a carnival that allows it to recycle history, opening up the potential for emancipation from the magnetic pull of chronological narratives. Past, present and future coexist in this performance.

As a continuation of *The End of the Line*, four days later, in the Centro Cultural de la Raza, the members set up a café environment known as *Café Urgente* (**Plate 1.23**), which served beer and coffee on a stage amongst several of the performance props, hence chiming in with Hicks' idea that 'border writing' should be a mix of

²³⁰ Caravels are small ships that were used by the Spaniards during the conquest.

²³¹ Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art*, pp. 173-174.

²³² Kelley (ed.), *The Border Art Workshop (BAW/TAF) 1984-1989*, p.17.

various genres. Notable people, including the aforementioned Dr Thomas Ybarra-Frausto and artist Felipe Ehrenberg, were invited. According to the rudimentary explanation on the BAW/TAF's five-year retrospective catalogue, the participants discussed '[...]the redefinition of the border and new models for its future unfolding.'²³³ In a similar note, in the catalogue for a different exhibition entitled *Café Mestizo* that showcased Ávalos work, which opened in 1989 at the Intar Gallery in New York, curator Philip Brookman, who was also a member of the BAW/TAF, wrote:

The café itself is a proposal, a sort of 'what if...?' project that hypothetically positions a Mexican restaurant [...] It exists in a vacuum since the context is both ethereal and ahistorical, a hermetic ideal crossing the boundaries of past and present, slightly out of time and focus...It is therefore inhabited by a cast of frontier characters seen through the gauze of mediated history. They are a deformed bunch, exaggerated to emphasize the abnormal nature of racial and cultural stereotyping.²³⁴

Café Mestizo also served American South-western cuisine. Mestizo in this context refers to the descendants of the mix between Spanish and Native Americans. The café was posited as an extension of Cooperstown, the early home of James Fenimore Cooper who wrote between 1827 and 1841 the series of novels *The Leatherstocking Tales*. In these novels, the main character was Nathaniel 'Natty' Bumppo, a white fearless warrior obsessed with miscegenation who, as Ávalos notes, was the 'granddaddy of all frontiersman.'²³⁵ By juxtaposing Cooper's writings to the current Mexican-American bilateral conflict, he intimated that the frontier conflicts have existed throughout history.

In my view, the same *modus operandi* described by Brookman is present in both *The End of the Line* and *Café Mestizo* (as well as *Café Urgente*), including the problematization of temporality as it 'crossed the boundaries of past and present.' But 'ahistorical' is the wrong term. Rather, the term 'gauze' employed by Brookman might

²³³ Kelley (ed.), *The Border Art Workshop (BAW/TAF) 1984-1989*, p. 6. I have discussed *Café Urgente* with David Ávalos and although he provided valuable material, he did not remember the particulars of what was said that evening.

²³⁴ Brookman, 'Conversations at Café Mestizo,' p. 11.

²³⁵ David Ávalos, 'Welcome to Café Mestizo,' in *Café Mestizo*, ed. Philip Brookman (New York: Intar Gallery, 1989), p. 2.

be understood as a call for perceiving historical narratives as both nebulous and malleable. In fact, Hicks, in *Border Writing*, claims that in border narratives ‘there is a displacement of time and space.’²³⁶

The BAW/TAF proposes a new modality for the construction of history, played out and indeed enacted by carnivalesque characters. Both *Café Mestizo* and *The End of the Line* enmesh historical narratives with other fictional or mythical stories—the former uses *The Leatherstocking Tales* as a frame while the latter adopt the Last Supper. The radio news clippings (fact), played out loud whilst Guillermo Gómez-Peña read a poem (fiction), arguing that ‘we are just a bunch of burning myths,’²³⁷ braids both mythical and real elements to create a single narrative.

Bakhtin’s elaboration of grotesque images offers another productive form of comparison. According to Bakhtin, there are two determining features of grotesque images: changing time, as they are in a process of ‘unfinished metamorphoses,’ and ambivalence, since they are never centred entities.²³⁸ The Möbius strip provides a model for this concept, since its shape is synonymous to the infinity symbol, thereby acting as a paradigm not only for the capacity to recycle history *ad infinitum*—in line with Bhabha’s notion of performative temporality— but also for the characters in *The End of the Line* to always remain ambivalent, in an endless, cyclical process of metamorphosis. The grotesque, for Bakhtin, ‘[...] discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world’²³⁹ and it does so, like in *The End of the Line*, via the conjuring of fictional characters. If the grotesque is an integral part of the carnival, and the carnival has an authorial intention to construct new historical narratives, then both fact and fiction can work in tandem to rewrite the past. This is congruous with *The Broken Line* and the BAW/TAF’s retrospective catalogues, which stubbornly refuse to tell a complete story, or to systematically document their work, always leaving the story ambivalent, a pastiche of different registers that never forms a coherent whole.

²³⁶Hicks, *Border Writing*, p.xxviii

²³⁷ This quote is taken from the aforementioned poem provided to me by David Ávalos.

²³⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.24.

²³⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.48.

Conclusion

The concern on the part of artists with the border emerged as a result of artistic practices that expanded their scope to include 'non art' spaces. Indeed, much has been written about 'nonart' practices in relation to urban planning, reform and revitalisation (like Krzysztof Wodiczko's light projects and Asco's *The First Supper*) but less so on 'nonart' practices that critiqued notions on a wider social space: that of the nation-state. By embedding the BAW/TAF within the history of 'new genre public art,' I have inserted their work into the genealogy of site-oriented practices whilst pointing out the way in which these ambitious artists tried to dismantle institutionalised notions of space.

What is the purpose, nearly thirty years later, of recuperating, reconstructing and contextualising a performance that has been virtually left out of art historical narratives? My main reason is that by destabilising hermetic notions of nationhood and sovereignty the BAW/TAF proposed valuable paradigms of constructing less violent histories of Mexican-U.S. relations that foster points of connection rather than reinforce systems of exclusion. History, as the members of the BAW/TAF proposed, can be revamped and rewritten in such a way that it shows us that we might, after all, 'be on the same side of history.' Exemplary of the performative temporality of the nation-state, *The End of the Line* urges us to reconsider our concept of history. Histories of the nation-state should be recycled and retold in order to break away from the mould of oppressive narratives that, nearly three decades later, still remain the norm albeit, admittedly, not altogether unquestioned.

The answer to the woman reciting in *The End of the Line* news broadcast, when she asks 'Will art prove once more the artificiality of the border?' is ultimately ambivalent. The reply is, on the one hand, that the aspirations of the BAW/TAF now look like so many past attempts at failed utopias. On the other hand, the kind of utopias conjured up by the BAW/TAF are still needed if projects towards alleviating the oppressive politics of the present are to be motivated.

Chapter Two

Systems of Exclusion and the Politics of Alterity: Guillermo Gómez-Peña and the 'Ethnographic Turn'

The violence that characterises the Mexico-U.S. border, as a system of exclusion, exerts an acute pressure on the tender nerve of identity. Gloria Anzaldúa starts her seminal *Borderlands* (1987) with a poem in which she claims:

1,950 mile-long open wound,
dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,
running down the length of my body,
staking fence rods in my flesh,
splits me splits me
me raja me raja [it slices me it slices me]²⁴⁰

Anzaldúa discusses the psychic wounds and bruises on identity that crossing the Mexico-U.S. border entails. Étienne Balibar has also underlined the connection between systemic violence and the formation of identities:

[...]the nation-form and nationalist ideology are articulated with a *structural violence*, both institutional and spontaneous, visible and invisible. And in order to discuss this we need to pause on the question of the formation of collective *identities* [...] we must understand how the fluctuation of identities is articulated within the universality of nationalism.²⁴¹

In this way, the formation of collective identities is interwoven with the structural violence that characterises nationalist ideologies.²⁴² Nation-state borders, due to their mechanisms of exclusion are often framed in identitarian terms. Indeed, it is often by

²⁴⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), p.25.

²⁴¹ Balibar, *We The People of Europe?*, p.24.

²⁴² Anne V. Murphy, *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary* (Albany: State University of New York, 2012).

conjuring feelings of belonging and identity that the nation-state mobilises its resources to seal borders, frequently with the use of military technology.

In order to explore the relationship between violence, identity and borders, I will turn to the work of Guillermo Gómez-Peña of the 1990s and embed his performances within the history of identity politics, site-oriented practices and what Hal Foster identified in 1995 as ‘the ethnographic turn.’ I will also consider how he underscored the role of capitalism in the fragmentation of binational relationships. Indeed, perhaps the BAW/TAF’s most conspicuous blindspot is that they did not factor in the role of capitalism in the conflicts between Mexico and the U.S. Instead, they focused solely on issues of identity, ethnicity and immigration. In contrast, the work of Gómez-Peña consists of a trenchant critique on capitalism and becomes one of the main frames with which he analyses Mexican-U.S. relations. Discussing how Gómez-Peña’s work and ‘the ethnographic turn’ forms part of the history of institutional critique, I will also examine his work in terms of site-specificity. Contextualising his work among the likes of Hans Haacke, Andrea Fraser and Fred Wilson, I will argue that from the well-established platform of institutional critique, Gómez-Peña launched a wider and more ambitious attack on a much larger institution, that of the nation-state. For borders are, as Balibar has pointed out ‘historical institutions.’²⁴³

In what follows, drawing from the writings of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, I will maintain that Gómez-Peña’s research practice during the first half of the 1990s—based on opinion polls, interviews and other forms of data collection—provides his audience in with a glimpse of what he perceived to be North America’s jingoistic and racist sentiments; and that his comedic approach is a technique to test the temperature of his audiences and measure public opinion. Following this, I will discuss the impact and development of postmodernist theories, specifically in regards to questions of history, temporality and comedy. I will also examine how his work is a response and an attack to the commodification not only of museums but also of historical knowledge, specifically looking at the history of ‘identity marketing’ and the

²⁴³ Balibar, *We the People of Europe?*, p.108.

politics of multiculturalism. Many of his methods of assessing public opinion are in line with those used in marketing, in particular those geared specifically to certain minority groups. I will show that Gómez-Peña's work does not merely to inflame the already turbulent fabric North America's politics; on the contrary, he exhorts his audience into abandoning divisions that operate along the lines of ethnicity and culture.

Site-Oriented Practices: From First to Second Wave of Institutional Critique

In the performance *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* (**Plate 2.1**) that premiered in Madrid's Columbus Square Plaza in 1992, Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Cuban-American artist Coco Fusco enclosed themselves in a cage dressed as 'authentic' inhabitants from the bogus island of Guatinaui that had just recently been 'discovered' in the Gulf of Mexico. Next to the cage was a fictitious map of the island of Guatinaui, placed alongside a didactic history of the Euro-American tradition of exhibiting 'outlandish' people—like the freak shows that became very popular at the end of the 19th century—for its sheer entertainment value. For a small fee, the performers completed certain 'tasks' at the request of the viewers: Fusco would dance to rap music while Gómez-Peña, for five dollars, offered to remove his undergarment to quickly reveal his genitals that were actually hidden and tucked behind his legs. Making it a fully 'interactive' experience, the audience was able to engage with the performers by feeding them fruit or paying Gómez-Peña to recite stories in a fake language. Although both Gómez-Peña and Fusco claim that they thought that the audience would be fully aware that this was a show to critique ethnographic modes of display, they pointed out that many in the audience were duped into believing this was an 'authentic' show. Some even expressed anger when they felt they had been lured into a hoax whereby the performers had been paid to pretend to be from a faraway land.

The performance toured several other museums and public spaces such as Covent Garden in London, Walker Center in Minneapolis, Australian Museum of Natural History in Sydney, Field Museum of Chicago and Whitney Museum Biennial in

New York. A year later, a video of this performance entitled *The Couple in the Cage* was made. It showed sections of this performance at the various locales as well as the reactions of the audience, the media attention it received and, interspersed, the archival footage of ‘natives’ in foreign lands (**Plate 2.2**). As clearly shown in the video, even in places where the performance was recognisably contextualised—like in the Whitney Biennial—the audience still enjoyed watching the artists performing what can be described as nothing less than humiliating acts.

It is telling that this performance took place in both fine art museums and natural history museums. In an article written in 1992 that contrasts both types of institutions, art critic Mieke Bal pointed out that objects found in natural history museums are generally deprived of the cultural, historical and aesthetic ‘patina’ assigned to their fine art cousins and are, instead, displayed as a supplement to biology. Natural history museums, according to Bal, are places where nature rather than culture is exhibited and human and animal displays are often buttressed by geological and anthropological artefacts.²⁴⁴ This argument is played out in Fusco’s and Gómez-Peña’s performance. There is a subtitle that intersects *The Couple in the Cage* video footage that states: ‘Until the middle of the 20th century, science and popular culture were joined together to prove the innate inferiority of non-white people.’ Although I will return to the importance of popular culture in Gómez-Peña’s work, nowhere does this point shine more than at the largest museum of natural history, the Smithsonian—Fusco and Gómez-Peña are dehumanized and presented as specimens of an exotic culture put under the magnifying glass of avid museum visitors.

Not dissimilar to Bal’s argument, art historian Diana Taylor, who has written extensively on Gómez-Peña’s work, has rightly pointed out that *Two Amerindians* is a critique of colonialist and neo-colonialist practices that not only stems back from Columbus’ arrival to America but more recently, to the inception of the museum in the 19th century. According to Taylor, the 19th century museum, with a racist penchant, isolated other cultures into a Petri dish in order to preserve a hegemonic narrative

²⁴⁴ Mieke Bal, ‘Showing, Showing Off,’ *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 566.

and to assert ethnographic paradigms of discovery.²⁴⁵ Similarly, Benedict Anderson, in the second edition of his seminal book *Imagined Communities*, examined the role of the museum in relation to the formation of colonial nation states. He claimed that the museum was one of the instruments with which the ‘colonial state imagined its dominion,’ establishing its legitimacy through its ancestry.²⁴⁶

Indeed, one crucial aim of Gómez-Peña’s work is critiquing art institutions like the Smithsonian, a concern that can be traced back to the late 1960s and 1970s when museums and art institutions were critically dissected by artists such as Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren and Marcel Broodthaers, who paid attention to the exclusionary politics of art institutions that often masqueraded under the guise of neutrality. In her discussion of site-specificity, Rosalyn Deutsche claimed that it is an aesthetic strategy that reveals the ways in which the meaning of art is contingent on its particular location.²⁴⁷ Zooming in on the link between art institutions and political, economic and ideological interests and agendas that influenced museological displays, they tried to make visible the mechanisms that circulated under the radar of viewers’ perspectives.²⁴⁸ Brian O’Doherty, who has written extensively on institutional critique and the lack of neutrality of ‘white cube’ gallery spaces, addressed this issue poetically: ‘The pedestal melted away, leaving the spectator waist-deep in wall-to-wall space. As the frame dropped off, space slid across the wall, creating turbulence in the corners [...] The white cube became art-in-potency, its enclosed space an alchemical medium.’²⁴⁹

Exemplifying the ‘first wave’ of institutional critique, Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers’ *Museum of Modern Art, Département des Aigles* (**Plate 2.3**)—that opened in September 1968 in the artist’s home in Brussels—consisted of a ‘made-up’

²⁴⁵ Diana Taylor, ‘A Savage Performance: Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco’s “Couple in the Cage,”’ *TDR* 42 (1998): 161-164.

²⁴⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 167.

²⁴⁷ Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996), p.61.

²⁴⁸ For a good brief introduction to Institutional Critique see Alexander Alberro, ‘Institutions, Critique, and Institutional Critique,’ in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2009), pp. 2-19.

²⁴⁹ Brian O’Doherty, ‘The Gallery as a Gesture,’ in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 321.

museum. It contained, among others, dozens of postcards showing 19th century paintings informally taped to the wall; black and white reproductions of well known drawings together with slides of art works projected on the wall; crates from a shipping company—that was frequently used by galleries and museums to transport artworks—on which visitors could sit and ‘admire’ the display. In short, he included works that both question and mock the notion of ‘authentic artworks.’²⁵⁰ Broodthaers explains in a 1972 article that ‘The fictitious museum tries to steal from the official, the real museum, in order to lend its lies more power and credibility [...] What is also important is to ascertain whether the fictitious museum sheds new light on the mechanisms of art, artistic life, and society. [...] Most artists adapt their production like industrial goods to conform to the market.’²⁵¹

Together with conceptual art, Miwon Kwon starts her genealogy of site-specificity with institutional critique that, in turn, has undergone many permutations since the 1960s. She observed that institutional critique developed ‘[...] a model of site specificity that implicitly challenged the “innocence” of space [...]’²⁵² later adding that ‘[...] current manifestations of site-specificity tend to treat aesthetic and art historical concerns as secondary issues.’²⁵³ Indeed, institutional critique was later extended by artists like Gómez-Peña (and others such as Fred Wilson and Renée Green to whom I will return) working in the late 1980s and 1990s to issues of race, multiculturalism and capitalism’s complicity with ‘high culture.’ For instance, not dissimilarly to Broodthaers ‘museum’ framework, in a performance entitled *The Ethno-Cyberpunk Trading Post & Curio Shop on the Electronic Frontier* that took place in the Diverse Works Gallery in Houston, Texas in 1994 (that I will discuss in more detail below), Gómez-Peña, James Luna and Roberto Sifuentes created a two-room display. The first room allowed the visitors to see the performers change into several elaborate

²⁵⁰ The museum appeared in several locations with different layouts and sections. For a further description and analysis of this work, see Rachel Haidu, ‘Speech and Politics,’ in *The Absence of Work: Marcel Broodthaers, 1964-1976* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2010), pp. 107-148.

²⁵¹ Marcel Broodthaers, ‘Musée D’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles (1972),’ in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2009), p.139.

²⁵² Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specificity and Locational Identity* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2002), p.13.

²⁵³ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p.24.

costumes. The second accommodated ‘high art’, including bogus archaeological artefacts, ‘pre-Columbian figurines,’ stuffed animals and the performers displaying themselves in the ‘human exhibition area.’

According to artist and critic Hito Steyerl, one of the crucial markers of this ‘second wave’ of institutional criticism was a shift from ‘[...] a critique of institution towards a critique of representation’, a move highly indebted to both feminist and postcolonialist epistemologies.²⁵⁴ A precedent to this type of artistic concern can be found in the 1970s work of artist Adrian Piper—redolent of Gómez-Peña’s and Fusco’s signature practice of performing fictionalised personas—who was also very much involved with the politics of representation in relation to identity, gender and art institutions. Piper writes that ‘My interest is to fully politicize the existing art-world context, to confront you here with the presence of certain representative individuals who are alien and unfamiliar to that context in its current form[....]’²⁵⁵ Paradigmatic of this critique of representation that Steyerl points to, for her *Mythic Being* project that lasted from 1973 to 1975, Piper dressed in the male form and wore, among other items, an Afro wig and a moustache in both public environments, such as the streets of New York City, and the artist’s own home. Among other actions, she pretended to ‘mug’ people and lustfully cruise women who were casually passing by. Her aim was to contest what she deemed to be widely held, deeply racist and stereotyped representations and preconceptions regarding black men in America. Often, like Gómez-Peña’s performances, Piper addressed audiences outside the enclave of the art world and documented her actions through photographs, recordings as well as staged tableaux. Piper maintains that she wanted to work outside the umbrella of art institution since they had consistently shunned her work due to, according to Piper,

²⁵⁴ Hito Steyerl, ‘The Institution of Critique,’ in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, ed. Gerald Raung and Gene Ray (London: MayFly, 2009), p. 17.

²⁵⁵ Adrian Piper, ‘Some Thoughts on the Political Character of this Situation (1983),’ in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2009), p.243.

both her race and gender,²⁵⁶ also sharing this confrontational aspect of Gómez-Peña's work. She asserts:

The strongest impact that can be received by a person in the passive capacity of viewer is the impact of human confrontation [...] It is the most aggressive and the most threatening, possibly because the least predictable and the least controllable in its consequences.²⁵⁷

The implied viewer in Piper's work holds xenophobic and racist sentiments. For instance, in a drawing created in relation to *Mythic Being*, Piper depicted herself much in the same way as she did in this performance and added a speech bubble that read 'I embody everything you most hate and fear' (**Plate 2.4**).²⁵⁸ The implied viewer in Gómez-Peña's work, as I will go on to analyse, closely parallels the one Piper conceived in the early 1970s. They both effectively and confrontationally theatricalise the effects of racism.

Museums also continued this trend into the 1990s by critiquing their own (past) museological frameworks. For instance, the National Museum of Natural History undertook a seven-year project particularly aimed at visitors aware of the museum's historical penchant to produce racially biased ways of displaying anthropological artefacts using, among others, 'dilemma labels' throughout their displays that described their previous ethical trespasses.²⁵⁹ Museums also allowed artists to critique their own institutions like Gómez-Peña's and Fusco's *Two*

²⁵⁶ Cherise Smith, "'The Politics of My Position': Adrian Piper and Mythic Being," in *Enacting Others: Politics of Identity in Eleanor Antin, Nikki S. Lee, Adrian Piper and Anna Deavere Smith* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 26-39.

²⁵⁷ Quoted in John P. Bowles, *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 257.

²⁵⁸ Smith, "'The Politics of My Position,'" p.51.

²⁵⁹ Lisa C. Corrin, 'Mining the Museum: Artists Look at Museums, Museums Look at Themselves,' in *Fred Wilson: A Critical Reader*, ed. Doro Globus (London: Riding House, 2011), pp.46-49.

Corrin points out that many self-reflexive exhibitions that attempted to demystify museum practices opened around this time including *Museum Looks at Itself: Mapping Past and Present at the Parrish Art Museum, 1897-1992* of 1992; *Art/Artifact* of 1988 at the Center for African Art in New York that argued that museums and museum practices should themselves be legitimate subjects for exhibitions in order to expose their often (subliminal) racially biased displays; as well as *The Desire and the Museum* of 1989 at the Whitney Museum of American Art that questioned and analyzed the agenda of curators, together with curatorial methods, that more often than not (albeit sometimes unconsciously) were employed to quietly smuggle their position through.

Amerindian projects that were sanctioned at the Smithsonian and the Whitney. American artist Renée Green, for example, parodied the politics of exhibition by staging her own satirical ones. Her 1991 work *Mise-en-scène* (**Plate 2.5**), created for the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia, consisted of furniture that was upholstered with a pattern that Green designed. The pattern mixed 18th century French pastoral scenes of tropical paradises together with slaves in chains and a man hanged during the Haitian Revolution, thereby linking the history of French textile production with the African slave trade—all this presented in an institution originally dedicated to fabric creation and display. Alongside this furniture, visitors could browse boxes filled with cards containing names of slave ships and general facts about the slave trade in France. Another box with a label ‘Trésor Caché’ (hidden treasure) contained photographs of the fleur-de-lis stamped on bare skin—this symbol was used to brand slaves in order to mark them as the property of the French West Indies Company.²⁶⁰

The work of American artist Fred Wilson also shed a spotlight on the ‘colour blind’ narratives that often mark museum displays. In *Mining the Museum* of 1992 exhibited at the Maryland Historical Society—an institution dedicated to the display of decorative and fine arts made in Maryland—Wilson displayed, in the section dedicated to contemporary artists, many objects from the museum’s collection but mockingly re-arranged with added new labels. At first glance, the exhibition looked like any traditional display but upon closer inspection, the viewer could see an unusual juxtaposition of ‘traditional objects’ of display, such as lavish metal goblets and elaborate furniture, together with items associated with slavery. In the display case entitled ‘Metalwork 1793-1880’ he arranged items such as a silver vessel in ‘Baltimore Repossé Style’ along with slave shackles flanked by a label that read, ‘Maker unknown, Made in Baltimore, c.1793-1872’ (**Plate 2.6**). Whipping posts, Ku Klux Klan Hoods, book pages detailing the monetary value of particular slaves, among other items, were similarly placed amongst other luxurious items.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Jennifer A. González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), pp. 224-225.

²⁶¹ Simon Dumenco, ‘Lost and Found: Artist Fred Wilson pulls apart Maryland’s Hidden History,’ in *Fred Wilson: A Critical Reader*, ed. Doro Globus (London: Riding House, 2011), pp.31-36.

The 'Ethnographic Turn': 'Framing the Framer' in Site-Oriented Performance Art

My analysis of Gómez-Peña's work inserts performance art into the history of site-oriented practices. Although relegated to a footnote, in *One Place After Another* Kwon recognised that 'The current modes of site-oriented practices can be mapped along an alternative genealogy of performance art.'²⁶² My aim is not to map an alternative genealogy but instead to interlace the various manifestations of site-oriented practices in a way that transcends medium specificity. The 'sites' in performance art might include the venue in which the performance is held that would correspond to James Meyer's definition of the literal site that I examined in the introduction. *Two Amerindians* involves the literal site in the sense that it critiqued the institution that hosted the performance, the Smithsonian. Gómez-Peña also, however, engages with the functional site since he analyses the spatial politics of the Mexico-U.S. border in various locations. To clarify, he has claimed:

I make art about the misunderstandings that take place at the border zone. But for me, the border is no longer located at any fixed geopolitical site. I carry the border with me, and I find new borders wherever I go [...] My America [...] is not described by the outlines of any of the standard maps [...] I oppose the outdated fragmentation of the standard map of America with the conceptual map of Arte America—a continent made of people, art, and ideas, not countries [...] I oppose the sinister cartography of the New World Order with the conceptual map of the New World Border—a great trans- and intercontinental border zone, a place in which no centres remain [...]²⁶³

Gómez-Peña, by endorsing the notion that the border is no longer located at any fixed 'geopolitical site,' engages with the functional site since, in Meyer's words, he adopts a 'mobile notion' of it.²⁶⁴ His performances, despite taking place in various locations, are always referring to a mobile border that manifests itself 'wherever he goes.'

²⁶² Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p.176.

²⁶³ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *The New World Border: Prophecies, Poems & Loqueras for the End of The Century* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1996), pp. 5-7.

²⁶⁴ James Meyer, 'The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity,' in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p.32.

The site-oriented practices that I outlined in the previous section, including *Two Undiscovered Amerindians*, fit in with a trend that art historian Hal Foster identified in his seminal 1995 essay 'The Artist as Ethnographer.' Broadly, this trend was characterised by a focus on the part of artists on cultural identity as well as on ethnography's participant-observation method of studying alterity. This turn was facilitated by the work of prominent academic James Clifford who wrote abundantly on ethnography. During the late 1980s, he recognised that 'ethnographic work has indeed been enmeshed in a world of enduring and changing power inequalities, and it continues to be implicated. It enacts power relations.'²⁶⁵ In an attempt to salvage its academic reputation, however, he proposed that ethnography should simply be conceived as a set of 'diverse ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant observation.'²⁶⁶ As Foster indirectly points out in his essay, one of the problems with his relational model is that power is always located on the side of the observer, thus making the power-balance inherently lopsided. This is not to say that Clifford's model is invalid; rather, that participant observation methodology should not be positioned outside the parameters of critical thinking and self-reflexivity. In that follows, I will engage closely with Foster's essay and the way in which he embeds 'the ethnographic turn' within the history of site specificity. I will also argue for a less negative account of the 'ethnographic turn' than Foster's, maintaining that artists, like Gómez-Peña and Fusco, adopting the participant-observation method valuably foregrounded issues of identity and its representation.

In 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' Foster extensively unpacks issues of site-specificity in relation to 'the ethnographic turn,' pointing out that:

[...] a series of shifts in the siting of art: from the surface of the medium to the space of the museum, from institutional frames to discursive networks, to the point where many artists and critics treat conditions like desire or disease [...] as sites for art [...] Mapping in recent art has tended toward the

²⁶⁵James Clifford, 'Introduction: Partial Truths,' in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1986), p.9.

²⁶⁶ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, And Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p.9.

sociological and the anthropological, to the point where an ethnographic mapping of an institution or a community is a primary form of site-specific art today.²⁶⁷

In *One Place After Another*, Kwon also places 'the ethnographic turn' within the history of institutional critique citing Haacke, amongst others, as forerunners. She claims that Foster's essay allows her to reveal '[...] the extent to which the identity or definition of a community remains open, like the site, as a scene of political struggle[...]'²⁶⁸ adding that, in such practices, a different notion of site is advanced '[...]as predominantly and intertextually coordinated, multiply located, discursive field of operation.'²⁶⁹ *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* critique the various contexts in which the performance was shown. Fusco describes *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* as a form of 'reverse ethnography,' a view that is self-reflexive and aptly summarised by one of the reporters featured in *The Couple in the Cage*, who claims that the people inside the cage are actors and that they are studying the audience more so than the audience is studying them. In this way, by examining their viewers' reactions, both artists replicate the very paradigms and methodologies of ethnography.

In an article entitled 'The Other History of Intercultural Performance', where Fusco discusses her experience in *Two Amerindians*, she makes some generalisations about her audiences reactions: 'Many upper-class Latin American tourists [...] voiced disgust that their part of the world should be represented in such a debased manner [...] Latinos and Native Americans have not criticized the hybridity of the cage environment [...] Americans and Europeans have spent hours speculating in front of us about how we could possibly run a computer [...].'²⁷⁰ She uses the same logic an ethnographer would use to draw conclusions about certain sections of the population. Gómez-Peña and Fusco's performance constitutes a powerful critique of ethnography's ideological underpinnings, of the institutions that showcase and promote its manner of display and of some audience's voyeuristic pleasure in indulging in primitivist fantasies. At the same time, however, it is important to

²⁶⁷ Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' p.185.

²⁶⁸ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p. 7.

²⁶⁹ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p.159.

²⁷⁰ Coco Fusco, 'The Other History of Intercultural Performance,' *TDR* 38 (1994): 162.

underline that they employ ethnographic methods in order to critique the discipline itself. By doing so, as I will shortly expand on, they advance a different type of ethnography, one that recognises the power structures activated by the participant-observation method and operates self-reflexively.

For the most part of 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' Foster points to the pitfalls of 'the ethnographic turn.' Like Gómez-Peña and Fusco, Foster is also concerned with the power imbalances that the discipline seems to invite. He claims that 'the ethnographic turn,' relied on three assumptions: '[...]that the site of political transformation is the site of artistic transformation;'²⁷¹ 'the site' is always located in the field of the 'Other' or the subaltern; and finally, that this Other is better equipped at accessing suppressed histories. The problem with such an approach, for Foster, is that in a global economy a pure outsider becomes an impossibility, and additionally, that the outsider also participates in a 'primitivist fantasy,' one that idealises otherness, even if only naively.²⁷² This idealisation results in a perfunctory attention paid to a particular marginalised group, a group that is quickly displaced by another one 'in need of attention,' resulting in '[...] a politics that may consume its historical subjects before they become historically effective.'²⁷³

Kwon has claimed that the negative aspects of Foster's 'ethnographic work' can be found in the artistic practice of Nikki S. Lee who, since the late 1990s, photographs herself in various 'subaltern' guises. After spending time with a particular group for a few weeks, she poses as, for instance, a Japanese tourist, a Hispanic women and a lesbian (**Plate 2.7**). Kwon has dubbed Lee's artistic practices as 'going native' performances that, she criticises, do not amount to an incisive critique of cultural stereotypes but rather fulfil a primitivist fantasy, abstracting 'subcultural communities as fashion tableaux' whilst reducing identity to a 'game of costume changes.'²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 173.

²⁷² Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' pp. 173-178.

²⁷³ Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' p. 179

²⁷⁴ Miwon Kwon, 'Experience vs. Interpretation: Traces of Ethnography in the Works of Lan Tuazon and Nikki S. Lee,' in *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, ed. Alex Coles (London: Blackdog Publishing, 2000), pp. 83-85.

In contrast to such allegedly narcissistic practices, like Lee's, Foster endorses ethnographic art practices that are self-reflexive and writes that '[...] in the face of these dangers—of too little or too much distance—I have advocated a parallaxic work that attempts to frame the framer as he or she frames the other.'²⁷⁵ He finds this self reflexivity in the work of Native American artist James Luna—who collaborated with Gómez-Peña not only during his years spent at the BAW/TAF but also in several of his performances during the 1990s—and sets his work as an example of an artist who effectively complicated and disturbed dominant cultures and its embedded stereotypes.²⁷⁶ In 1987, Luna performed *Artifact Piece* (**Plate 2.8**) at the Museum of Man in Balboa Park, San Diego, where he placed himself in a sandbox as a corpse, covered only by a scanty towel. Several personal artefacts, including his divorce papers and a selection of 'healing' objects used in La Jolla Indian reservation, lay alongside his immobile body. Meticulous labels adorned the display and provided viewers with biographical information and 'exotic' anecdotes. Some viewers remarked that he looked very much alive and one of them was recorded as stating 'Don't be silly, they don't put live ones in the museums.'²⁷⁷ According to art historian Jane Blocker, Luna's projects seek to '[...] expose the pure theatricality of the living history museum, infotainment, the historical theme park [...]' To accomplish this, he overacts the part and runs history's shtick into the ground.'²⁷⁸ In another work, *Take a Picture with a Real Indian* (**Plate 2.9**) of 1991, gallery visitors could choose from a vast array of photographs that showed Luna dressed in different attires. After they had chosen the 'desired look,' Luna would dress in the costume of choice and allow visitors to take souvenir pictures with him much in the same way that Gómez-Peña and Fusco did a year later for *Two Undiscovered Amerindians*.²⁷⁹ If for Foster the work of Luna cuts through some of the critical restraints of ethnographic oriented work by '[...] primitivizing and anthropologizing through a parodic "trickstering" of these very

²⁷⁵ Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' p.200

²⁷⁶ Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' p. 199

²⁷⁷ Miwon Kwon, 'Postmortem Strategies,' *Documents* 3(1994): .123.

²⁷⁸ Jane Blocker, 'Peoples of Memory: James Luna and the Production of History,' in *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p.28.

²⁷⁹ Blocker, 'Peoples of Memory,' p. 28.

processes’²⁸⁰ then, since Luna and Gómez-Peña’s work is so similar, the same statement holds true for Gómez-Peña’s work.

As evidenced by my summary of ‘the ethnographic turn,’ despite ‘rescuing’ Luna’s work, for the most part of the essay, Foster focuses on the pitfalls of artists adopting ethnographic methods. One problem that Foster associates with the ‘ethnographic turn’ that does apply to Gómez-Peña’s practice is that in order to critique the institutions such artistic practices have to operate within its confines. For instance, the Smithsonian sanctioned *Two Amerindians*. My reservation with this part of Foster’s argument, however, is that he frames this aspect of ‘the ethnographic turn’ solely in a negative light. Is it not also evidence that such practices were effective in changing the institutions themselves? Does this not show that cultural institutions were productively becoming more self-reflexive? Though we should remain critical of institutions and the central role they play in framing artistic practices, we should also not simply equate institutions with dishonesty and abuses of power.

All of this is not to say that many of the criticisms Foster launches at the ‘ethnographic turn’ are not valid. On the contrary, he rightly points to many of the minefields that the field of ethnography contains. The call he makes for self-reflexivity is also crucial in avoiding ‘othering’ practices that operate in concert with neo-colonialist attitudes. And the work of Gómez-Peña does share many of Foster’s concerns including the uncritical trend of primitivising or idealising ‘otherness’ and the general questioning of ethnographic authority. But his method of ‘reverse ethnography’ illustrates how the discipline can be applied critically, self-reflexively and productively.

Indeed, in his essay, Foster—in line with the *October* group’s general reticence in addressing overtly political art practices—remains generally averse to and suspicious of these artists concerned with the politics of alterity and the disciplinary crossovers between anthropology and art. As I mentioned, one of the problems with Foster’s argument, is that he does not give credit to institutions that were actively trying to revamp their museological paradigms and point to their early mistakes. Moreover,

²⁸⁰ Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer,’ p. 199.

almost as if diluting its significance, Foster claims that '[...] anthropology is the compromise discourse of choice.'²⁸¹ In the introduction to *The Return of the Real*, he claims that, with the advent of the 'ethnographic turn' there has been '[...] a turn from medium-specific elaborations to debate-specific projects.'²⁸² This, for Foster, makes it very difficult to 'learn the discursive breadth' of all of the subjects addressed by these diverse practices and therefore 'may hinder consensus about the necessity of art.'²⁸³ Throughout 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' Foster displays a restrictive nostalgia for artistic practices hermetically sealed from multidisciplinary incursions. Perhaps my own suspicion of Foster's negative tone in this essay can be attributed to a generational shift. Foster, in his words, is 'heavily invested in the minimalist genealogy of art'²⁸⁴ whereas, the generation of art historians in which I was brought up in were, as I mentioned in the introduction, reading the writings of Jacques Rancière and highly enthusiastic and welcoming about the intersection between politics and art.

Measuring Public Opinion: Polls, *Vox Pop* and Comedy as a Social Science

For his performances Gómez-Peña often employed methods of data collection applied by ethnographers and journalists, and used in the fields of marketing and advertising, in order to critique institutions, expose certain audience members' racist fantasies and mimic research done by corporations in order to target 'minority groups.' Before unpacking the particulars of Gómez-Peña's approach, however, in this section I will focus on his self-reflexive practice that questioned the very methods of measuring public opinion, especially the opinion poll and episodic framing. I will also examine his use of humour, which in his hands functions almost as an act of surveillance, sizing up the audience's laughs together with their political beliefs.

In the late 1960s, Haacke, who was also developing strategies for critiquing institutions, had already been using opinion polls to gather information about

²⁸¹ Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' p. 183.

²⁸² Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p.xi.

²⁸³ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p.xii.

²⁸⁴ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, p.xiii.

museum audiences. In 1969, in a work entitled *Gallery Goers' Birthplace and Residence Profile* at a gallery in New York City, Haacke hung several maps of New York City boroughs, of the United States and of the rest of the world. Alongside this display, he printed a set of instructions asking visitors to place a red pin on the map indicating their birthplace and a blue pin to mark their permanent place of residence. In this way he aimed at obtaining demographic information about the museum audiences and, simultaneously, force these audiences to reflect about themselves.²⁸⁵ Haacke applied another strategy involving direct address to the viewer in his *MOMA Poll* of 1970 **(Plate 2.10)**, that was part of a group exhibition entitled 'Information' at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Here he asked viewers to cast a ballot in response to the question 'Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina Policy be a reason for you not to vote for him in November?' During this time, Rockefeller was considering running for president and he had, together with his relatives and close associates, a prominent presence in the board of trustees of this museum.²⁸⁶ By asking this question, Haacke aggressively reinserted a polemical political subject into a cultural institution, de-mystifying art institutions general aura of isolation as well as shedding light on its power and economic dynamics.²⁸⁷

After Haacke's challenging question on Rockefeller's politics, the show had an early termination, and for years the artist was not invited back to this museum. Throughout the early 1970s, Haacke continued to conduct numerous polls in other places, such as *Documenta 5* in Kassel, with which he later created illustrative graphs and charts that vividly displayed the audience's demographics. In an essay published in 1977, Haacke examined the data he obtained from another poll conducted at the John Weber Gallery in New York. From this he concluded that most of the gallery's visitors were university graduates and came from successful economic backgrounds, thus challenging seemingly stable notions of aesthetic democratisation and

²⁸⁵ Rosalyn Deutsche, 'Hans Haacke and the Art of Not Being Governed Quite So Much,' in *Culture and Contestation in the New Century*, ed. Marc James Léger (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2011), pp.27-29.

²⁸⁶ Rosalyn Deutsche, 'Property Values: Hans Haacke, Real Estate, and the Museum,' in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996), p.166.

²⁸⁷ Walter Grasskamp, 'Real Time: The Work of Hans Haacke,' in *Hans Haacke*, ed. Walter Grasskamp, Molly Nesbit and Jon Bird (New York and London: Phaidon, 2004), pp.45-46.

universality.²⁸⁸ Art historian Rosalyn Deutsche aptly summarises Haacke's project as follows: 'These works also implied that art museums do not preserve aesthetic truths transcending social conflicts but are, rather, social institutions that preserve privilege and are therefore immersed in conflict.'²⁸⁹

Returning to Gómez-Peña, art historian Christopher L. McGahan, in an article entitled 'Re-Playing "Racial Knowledge" and Cybercultural Subjectivity', explores one of his 1994 works—*The Temple of Confessions* (**Plate 2.11**)—in relation to cybernetic subjectivities and online opinion polls. The performance, which took place in both the Detroit Institute of Fine Arts and the Scottsdale Center for the Arts, consisted of Gómez-Peña and his long-time collaborator, Roberto Sifuentes, placing themselves inside a religious diorama, in the form of a Perspex box, from which the audience was encouraged to confess their 'multicultural sins' to the performers. Two years after the premier of this performance, Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes created a webpage where visitors could answer a survey intended to expose their alleged racist preconceptions.

One of McGahan's main contentions is that the artists gave the audience the opportunity to 're-situate themselves in social practices of racial othering and information technological processes.'²⁹⁰ I would like to add that even though Gómez-Peña's performances do offer such an opportunity, they are rather more concerned about exposing and even ridiculing their audiences, almost as if in an act of surveillance. Gómez-Peña employs methods of research other than just the opinion poll. In his performances he uses unconventional methods—such as, as I will expand, testing their audiences as comedians by observing what makes them laugh—to study and bring to light what he deemed to be deeply ingrained preconceptions about race and the fear of Otherness.

Many academics and theorists have pointed to the pitfalls of the methods of measuring 'public opinion', whose very existence as a coherent entity is slippery at best, as they are contingent on shifting economic, cultural and social forces. Is public

²⁸⁸ Deutsche, 'Hans Haacke,' p. 29.

²⁸⁹ Deutsche, 'Property Values,' pp.167-168.

²⁹⁰ Christopher L. McGahan, *Racing Cybertculture: Minoritarian Art and Cultural Politics on the Internet* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), p66.

opinion the same as ‘mass opinion’? Where do the opinions of interest groups fit in at a macro-structural level? Can accurate generalisations ever be made? And for the purposes of this chapter, can unsystematically selecting audience members by virtually hijacking public spaces—as in the case of *Two Amerindians*—produce any valuable information about public opinion? What is certain is that the notion of public opinion is crucial for the formation of a democratic arena; and that the public opinion poll is the dominant method of researching it, both because of its supposed objectivity and its emulation of a democratic ‘one person, one vote’ system. But critics, among them sociologist James R. Beninger, have pointed to some of the dangers of regarding opinion polls as transparent instruments of measurement. He claims that the opinion poll has developed alongside an escalating ‘rationalisation’ ethos that—holding hands with mass culture and the media—has been responsible for the disintegration of the democratic public sphere.²⁹¹

Of course, Gómez-Peña’s methods do not neatly align with the opinion polls and ethnography’s quantitative techniques for obtaining data—he does not give an illusion of scientific objectivity or impartial distance from the studied object. The cross-sections of the population he studies are inevitably smaller than in a well-funded governmental or corporate study. Then, do his ‘acts of research’ give us any information at all about the U.S. attitudes to ethnicity and race or do they merely inflame an already volatile situation?

The writings of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu are particularly useful in unpacking some of the fieldwork strategies used by Gómez-Peña. Bourdieu ingeniously elucidates some of the stumbling blocks of the methods of study in the social sciences and critically enquires about the value (or lack thereof) of the knowledge obtained from them. ‘Acts of research’ for Bourdieu ‘are fundamentally political acts.’²⁹² It is in this manner—as a researcher—that Gómez-Peña perhaps

²⁹¹ James R. Beniger, ‘The Impact of Polling on Public Opinion: Reconciling Foucault, Habermas and Bourdieu,’ *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 4 (1992): 208-209.

²⁹² Quoted in David Swartz, ‘Pierre Bourdieu’s Political Sociology and Public Sociology,’ in *Cultural Analysis and Bourdieu’s Legacy: Setting Accounts and Developing Alternatives*, ed. Elizabeth Silva and Alan Warde (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 50. The original was published in French in Pierre Bourdieu and Otto Hahn, ‘La théorie,’ *VH* (101): 12-21.

intervenes most effectively in the public arena.²⁹³ One of Bourdieu's critiques of the social sciences is that they relentlessly strive for an impartiality that is ultimately unattainable. He claims that public opinion is a chimera, a 'social definition implicitly accepted by those who prepare or analyse or use opinion polls, [and it] simply does not exist.'²⁹⁴

Bourdieu's main argument on public opinion polls is that they change public opinion itself—in other words, the object of study changes as it is being studied. Opinion polls are often understood, wrongly, as serving nobody's interests in particular. Political scientist Susan Herbst, who has also written extensively on opinion polls, argues in her book *Numbered Voices* that polling has been contrived to standardise a vastly diverse set of opinions. Following Foucault, she draws the conclusion that polling is a sophisticated method of surveillance through which social control is wielded and legitimised, thereby shaping a given population's opinion. She compares methods of gathering information about the public sphere to Foucault's prison model of the Panopticon, which consists of an observation tower surrounded by prison cells arranged in a circular manner. Although the person inside the tower can see everything that occurs within the prison, the prisoners are unaware of when exactly they are being watched which, in turn, determines the controlling power. According to Foucault, this is the quintessential form of domination—where subjects can be seen but they do not know when. Power, therefore, much like public opinion polling and ethnography's 'participant observation', is firmly lodged in monitoring, quantification and calculation.²⁹⁵

Instead of using such quantitative methods, Bourdieu proposes that 'imperatives of neutrality [be] overridden entirely' and that is better to 'provide a

²⁹³ In fact, Bourdieu has engaged extensively with Hans Haacke's methodology. In an interview, he told Haacke that his 'quasi-sociological observations and reflections are fully integrated into your artistic work [...] You have a truly remarkable "eye" for seeing the particular forms of domination that are exerted on the art world [...]'. [Pierre Bourdieu, 'Helmsboro Country,' in *Free Exchange: Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke* (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1995), p.1].

²⁹⁴ Bourdieu, 'Public Opinion,' p. 130.

²⁹⁵ Susan Herbst, *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling has Shaped American Politics* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1993), pp.20-23.

series of explicit positions taken by groups elected to establish and diffuse opinion.’²⁹⁶ Crucial to Bourdieu’s thought is the attempt to dissolve the dichotomy between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’. As a result, his ethnographic writings on Algeria are often weaved with autobiographical data.²⁹⁷ For Bourdieu‘[...] Primary experience transformed in and through scientific practice transforms scientific practice and conversely.’²⁹⁸

In fact, Gómez-Peña’s performances and writings are always filled with personal stories. Fusco observes that during the 1980s—at the time when Gómez-Peña was working with the BAW/TAF—there was a growing use of autobiographical material in performance art, hitherto marginalised by social and political norms, that concentrated on giving a voice to subjectivities, often employing personal ‘poetic testimonies’ to illustrate widespread problems.²⁹⁹ This mixing of the personal with the political is also visible in Piper’s artistic practice, which underlines the value of personal experiences in engaging the issue of race. She claims: ‘I use my own experience [...] when it seems strategically the best way to make concrete those thoughts, sentiments, or beliefs that might be dismissed as being too theoretical or abstract.’³⁰⁰ Under the ‘ethnographic turn,’ many artists, including Gómez-Peña, made ample use of personal stories. Foster points out what he thinks are the problems of imbricating the personal with the political: ‘[...]for self-othering can flip into self-absorption, in which the project of an “ethnographic self-fashioning” becomes a practice of narcissistic self-refurbishing.’³⁰¹ Kwon has similarly stated that the ‘ethnographic turn’ has witnessed an ‘[...]overvaluation of “personal experience” as the basis of true and reliable knowledge about culture and the self. Understood as the sources of only real and authentic knowledge, “experience” validates personal

²⁹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Public Opinion Does Not Exist,’ in *Communication and Class Struggle*, ed. Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelaub (New York: International General, 1979), p.127.

²⁹⁷ In 1955 Pierre Bourdieu went to Algeria that at the time was struggling for colonial independence from France and enduring periods of severe violence. He conducted ethnographic research focused on Kabylia and other nationalist stronghold areas.

²⁹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Participant Objectivation,’ *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9 (2003): 289

²⁹⁹ Coco Fusco, ‘Performance and the Power of the Popular,’ in *Let’s Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance* (London and Seattle: The ICA and Bay Press, 1995), pp.170-172.

³⁰⁰ Quoted in Bowles, *Adrian Piper*, p.10.

³⁰¹ Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer,’ p.180.

opinions and subjective feelings as [...] undeniable terrains.’³⁰² Whilst it is true that we should remain sceptical about ‘universalising’ the artist’s personal experience and taking it as the basis of ‘true knowledge,’ following Bourdieu, I also think personal stories—even if they ‘flip into self absorption’ to borrow Foster’s words—underline the ‘artist as ethnographer’s’ own position in relation to the objects that she or he studies. In other words, by injecting personal stories into an ethnographic project artists can disarm the discipline’s alleged objectivity.

Moreover, the imbrication of the personal and the political has an important historical precedent. It can be traced back to the 1960s feminist movement, particularly as it developed in the U.S. Political scientist Carol Hanisch, in the 1969 seminal journal *Feminist Revolution*, first articulated the dictum that ‘the personal is political’.³⁰³ Jo Freeman, also a feminist political scientist, explains the ethos behind this mantra: ‘[...] what was thought to be a personal problem has a social cause and a political solution [...] Women learn to see how social structures and attitudes have molded them from birth and limited their opportunities[...].’³⁰⁴ Psychologist Geraldine Moan points out that this interlacing extends to the arena of postcolonial studies, heavily influenced as well by systemic domination repression.³⁰⁵ As such, weaving the personal with the political can bring to the surface certain problems that have previously remained buried underneath political and social structures of power.

Returning to Gómez Peña, his 1996 book *The New World Border* —a collection of essays, poetry and performance scripts—is full of personal stories dating from his arrival to the United States in the late 1970s. He poetically writes in the opening chapter about his personal motivations for engaging with art related to the border:

I am a migrant performance artist. I write in airplanes, trains and cafés. I travel from city to city [...] smuggling my work [...] Home is always somewhere else. Home is both “here” and “there” or somewhere in

³⁰² Kwon, ‘Experience vs. Interpretation,’ p. 76.

³⁰³ Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 18.

³⁰⁴ Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women’s Liberation* (New York: David McKay and Company, 1975), p. 118.

³⁰⁵ Geraldine Moane, *Gender and Colonialism: A Psychological Analysis of Oppression and Liberation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), pp.10-13.

between. Sometimes it's nowhere[....] I make art about the misunderstandings that take place at the border zone. But for me, the border is no longer located at any fixed geopolitical site. I carry the border with me, and find new borders wherever I go [...] My America is a continent (not a country) that is not described by the outlines on any of the standard maps [...] My America includes different peoples, cities, borders, and nations.³⁰⁶

In a chapter in this book, entitled 'Real-Life Border Thriller,' he narrates a personal story consisting of one of Gómez-Peña's encounters with the police. He describes how he was 'deeply hurt'³⁰⁷ by the police who arrested him on suspicion of kidnapping while he was quietly having a meal in a restaurant with his own (blonde) son. Gómez-Peña asserts that the arrest was made solely on the assumption that father and son physically appeared to come from different ethnicities. Experiences such as these, he maintains, have fuelled his determination to engage with racialised politics in the U.S. This story is amongst the three other 'chronicles' in his book that narrate and politicise his personal experiences.

Gómez-Peña employs qualitative rather than quantitative methods to assess the opinion of the public. Thus, in addition to the opinion polls, Herbst notes that 'episodic framing', often used by journalists, plays a major role in taking the temperature of public opinion in his work. 'Episodic framing' focuses on a particular individual or group, using their stories and narratives as a yardstick to measure *a priori* how the public feels about a particular situation.³⁰⁸ It is also loosely known as 'vox pop'—derived from the Latin expression *vox populi*, the voice of the people—in which journalists seemingly randomly interview individuals for their opinion.³⁰⁹ This is the same method used in *Two Amerindians* and taped in *The Couple in the Cage* whereby the audience is asked about their feelings regarding a human display. One audience member in the Smithsonian claims that 'he is so interested in things that he doesn't appear to understand [...] he seems to get some kind of recognition from them

³⁰⁶ Gómez-Peña, *The New World Border*, p. 5.

³⁰⁷ Gómez-Peña, *The New World Border*, p. 56.

³⁰⁸ Susan Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion: How Political Actors View the Democratic Process* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp.18-19.

³⁰⁹ Stuart Allan, *Journalism: Critical Issues* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005), pp. 102-103.

though he doesn't know what they are, like the TV set [...]’ As McGahan discusses in *The Temple of Confessions*, although Gómez-Peña online questionnaires is his version of ‘opinion polls,’ most of his work is centred on a form of ‘episodic framing’ whereby audiences are encouraged to give their own opinions and are provided with an arena in which to voice them.³¹⁰ In *vox pop* there is no illusion of scientific objectivity since a few voices are meant to represent the public opinion in its entirety. This chimes in with Gómez-Peña’s project as he does nothing to hide his personal motivations—his chapter ‘Real-Life Border Thriller’ clearly illustrates this. It is perhaps by abandoning any claim to political impartiality that his research departs from traditional forms of measuring public opinion and opens up a new, albeit unconventional, avenue in which to gauge the opinion of the public.

Herbst concludes that both opinion polls and personal anecdotes are crucial tools in constructing public opinion and that, of course, this information more often than not is obtained from the mass media.³¹¹ Gómez-Peña, since his early career days at the BAW/TAF, has been keenly aware on how to harness media attention, as with his *The End of the Line* performance, the subject of my first chapter, which was documented by several journalists contacted by the Workshop. As an independent artist working in the 1990s, he increasingly engaged with the media’s role in the public sphere. As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, the video *The Couple in the Cage* opens with voiceovers of several overlapping radio programmes, taken from the various locations in which the work took place. The voices announce, for example, the performance of an ‘unusual tribe’ in London’s Covent Garden or ‘Indians behind bars’ in Madrid’s Columbus Square. The voices of the reporters in the radio converge, until they form an almost unidentifiable chatter, as if to underline their homogeneity and their standardised, packaged, discourse.

As well as opinion polls and personal anecdotes, humour is another method Gómez-Peña employs in order to measure public opinion. His role as a de-facto comedian is functional to his aim of exposing the views of the audience. In a recently published anthology entitled *The Laughing Stalk*, art historian Judy Batalion examines

³¹⁰ McGahan, *Racing Cyberculture*, p.68.

³¹¹ Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion*, p.17.

comedy in terms of audience responses. Comedy, perhaps more than any other genre, involves reciprocity between the audience and the performer—the latter needs to listen carefully to what the former wants. Alice Rayner who wrote an essay for Batalion's book, argues that comedians can function as a special type of social scientists. They measure 'who laughs at what' and what jokes work for specific subjects and communities, thus gauging their audience's responses, not empirically as a social scientist would, but in terms of 'feedback mechanisms' such as laughter, applause and attendance. She writes that comedy is a 'persistent gauge of character in both individual and collective conditions,'³¹² and continues, '[b]oth the social scientist and the comedian target an audience on the basis of a certain *ethos* where attitudes or habits, feelings, perceptions, or assumptions produce what is known as the *character* of a community, a nationality, a gender, an age.'³¹³ Since humour varies greatly between audiences and communities, comedians often have to adapt and change their act in order to obtain laughs. In line with this argument, stand-up comedian and academic Kevin McCarron expounds that if '[a]pprentice stand-up comedians eventually become good stand-up comedians it is not because they have become better *writers*. All appearances to the contrary, its is because they have become better *listeners*[...] they have been listening to the audiences[...].'³¹⁴ So, for instance, when Fusco and Gómez-Peña in *Two Amerindians* dance, remove one of their garments, allow to be hand fed at the audience's request, it is because they are listening to their audience, watching, observing and measuring their responses and subsequently recording them in an odd and mischievous reversal of ethnographic practice. Many of Gómez-Peña's performances, some that I will discuss during the rest of the chapter, equally exploit the relationship between the audience and himself, leading viewers to expose their desires, fantasies and political beliefs.

In the section that follows I analyse Gómez-Peña's work in relation to mass media, popular culture and the politics of identity. At the same time I will unpack the

³¹² Alice Rayner, 'Creating the Audience: It's All in the Timing,' in *The Laughing Stalk: Live Comedy and Its Audiences*, ed. Judy Batalion (Anderson: Parlor Press, 2012), pp.30-32.

³¹³ Rayner, 'Creating the Audience: It's All in the Timing,' p.30.

³¹⁴ Kevin McCarron, 'Seven Steps to the Stage: The Audience as Co-Creator of the Stand-up Comedy Night,' in *The Laughing Stalk: Live Comedy and Its Audiences*, ed. Judy Batalion (Anderson: Parlor Press, 2012), p.178.

value of humour in his work by placing it historically in the context of postmodernist theories

The Comic Logic of Postmodernism: The Subversive Potential of Jokes

Little attention has so far been paid to the obvious references in Gómez-Peña's work to mass culture: in *Two Amerindians*, Coco Fusco dances to rap and wears fashionable Converse shoes and a black baseball cap while Gómez-Peña is working on a computer, a much rarer luxury in the early 1990s than it is today. According to Paul Gilroy in his book *Against Race*, marketing strategies in advanced capitalist societies are instrumental in creating divisions that operate along the axis of ethnicity, where commodities are suffused with a (questionable) sense of identity.³¹⁵ In fact, Gómez-Peña's critique of capitalism became particularly pointed in the mid 1990s due to the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, the same year of the premiere of his performance *Naftaztec*, which I will extensively discuss in this section. This agreement contrasted strongly with Mexico's previous protectionist policies and wariness of foreign intervention and influence. Although NAFTA smoothed the passage of commodities, it did nothing to ease the transit of people. Sociologist Saskia Sassen rightly points out that while 'economic globalization denationalizes national economies[...] immigration is renationalizing politics.'³¹⁶

Gómez-Peña's works did not only critique the practice and methods of ethnography as they relate to issues of exhibitions, but also its patent collaboration with mass culture. Pointing to mass media's homogenising effects, Gómez-Peña claims that:

One of the things I am trying to investigate in my work is trans-culture, and what is happening to Latin American culture when it crosses the border, how the U.S. creates simulacra of authenticity [...] The amigoization of the North, this kind of phony Latino culture without thorns, without barbed

³¹⁵Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 103-104.

³¹⁶Saskia Sassen, *Losing Control? Sovereignty in an Age of Globalization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 63.

wire, without viscera, without blood and saliva, this homogenized kind of Latino American culture that is crafted to appeal to the desire of American and European yuppies [...] often gets mistaken or what otherwise would be the true cultural achievement of Latin American population within the U.S.³¹⁷

A video created by Gómez-Peña and his long-time collaborator Roberto Sifuentes, entitled *Naftaztec: Pirate Cyber-TV for A.D.*, was shown to 3.5 million American viewers on Thanksgiving Day in 1994 (**Plate 2.12**), and exemplifies this ‘phony Latino culture’ that he was trying to expose. Sanctioned by the station, the two TV ‘pirates’ gave the false impression that they had stolen the airwaves to transmit their hour-long show. Gómez-Peña describes that the programme consisted of ‘TV formats gone bananas’ and that ‘the visual style was very much like MTV.’³¹⁸ He also pretended to deliver newscasts, albeit with a satirical twist, often interrupted by various types of footage. Gómez-Peña adopted a journalistic rhetoric from the start of the show claiming:

Good evening post-NAFTA America. I’m sorry to inform you that this is a pirate TV broadcast. My name is el Naftaz-tec [...] interrupting your coitus as always [...] tonight you are about to witness[...] a true example of post-CNN Chicano Art.

Naftaztec differs from *Two Amerindians* both because it was a live TV broadcast, not a venue performance, and also because it was scripted rather than improvised, and thereafter published in his book *The New World Border*. Reading the dialogue of the performance is not an easy task even for a bilingual viewer who is familiar with the slang—the viewer is lost in a mélange of Spanish, English, *Náhuatl* and a myriad of argot and popular culture references. In a section with the title ‘Performance as Counter-Journalism’ he shows, in a black and white film, a priest/journalist reciting news relating to California’s Proposition 187—a 1994 ballot initiative that prohibited ‘illegal aliens’ from accessing public services, including health care and education

³¹⁷ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, ‘Guillermo Gómez-Peña interviewed by Mildred Thomson,’ in *Interventions and Provocations: Conversations on Art, Culture, and Resistance*, ed. Glenn Harper (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 5.

³¹⁸ Gómez-Peña, *New World Border*, p. 111.

(Plate 2.13). Although the Proposition briefly passed, it was later declared unconstitutional.³¹⁹ Behind the evangelical journalist, the Santa Monica area in Los Angeles is in flames in what is seemingly a battle of quasi-apocalyptic proportions. Oddly, the priest claims that the events of Proposition 187 were already written in the scriptures. He starts reading a book that resembles the Bible and preaches: '[...] beware for they will deliver you up to councils, scourge you in synagogues and you will be delivered up to governors and kings [...].’ This is then interrupted by interference mixed in with what appears to be ‘real’ footage of newscasts, to finally reveal ‘The End of the Century Newscast,’ where Gómez-Peña is dressed as Uncle Sam. He starts delivering a concocted newscast asserting that the AIDS crisis has infected the immunological system of the mainstream; that President Bush has been diagnosed with Down’s syndrome; and that multiculturalism has finally turned into a TV series. As he is delivering the newscast he claims in Spanish ‘I made a mistake [...] let’s try it one more time guys’ exposing, ridiculing and parodying the news media’s often errant (but rehearsed) way of delivering ‘facts.’ Gómez-Peña’s work is a powerful attack not only on the media’s nationalistic penchant, flagged by Gómez-Peña dressed as Uncle Sam, but also on its involvement in crafting racial Othering.

Gómez-Peña’s critique of mass media, like the one he articulated in *Naftaztec*, should be historicised within poststructuralist and postmodernist theories that were popular in the 1980s and 1990s. Notwithstanding, he has been criticised for abusing such theories. For instance, José David Saldívar, author of *Border Matters*, attacks his performances on the basis that they are often too ‘steeped in poststructuralist playfulness,’³²⁰ falling into the trap of surrendering criticality in favour of comedy. But perhaps comedy is the most effective vehicle with which to broach potentially inflammatory topics such as racism. Humour theorist Jerry Palmer outlines some of the functional (rather than amusing) elements of humour: taboo subjects, not without some caution, can be more easily mentioned; facilitates and negotiates the introduction of polemical subjects into everyday discourse; acts as a ‘safety valve’; and

³¹⁹ Robin Dale Jacobson, *The New Nativism: Proposition 187 and the Debate Over Immigration* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), pp. xiii-xx.

³²⁰ José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997), p.95.

importantly, helps to dismantle deeply ingrained rules of behaviour.³²¹ Although Gómez-Peña's humour is anything but subtle or overtly cautious, its critical complexities do allow foreffective communication.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas in a 1970 essay entitled 'Jokes' wrote that 'all jokes have this subversive effect on the dominant structure of ideas[... A joke's] excitement lies in the suggestion that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective.'³²² She further claims that jokes are expressive of the social situation in which they are told and aim to dismantle 'dominant pattern of relations.'³²³ Performance artist Andrea Fraser, who like Gómez-Peña engages in the critique of institutions, also employs humour to powerfully carry her message across and 'dismantle' hegemonic patterns. For InSite 97 Fraser performed her piece *Inaugural Speech* where she attempted to expose the politics of biennials and international institutions. Discussing her performance and underlining the critical potential of humour, in terms similar to those of Douglas, Fraser states:

It's funny. I wrote it to be funny—rather desperately, in fact [...] It was a very interesting dynamic and seemed to demonstrate that the performance was quite successful in activating the audience, transforming their applause from the pretty passive recognition of political authority [...] to an active articulation of various positions[...] What seems particular to comedy [...] is the degree to which it can function, not only as a vehicle for critical content [...] but also as a critique of subversion of form and the relations produced and reproduced through various forms.³²⁴

In a manner that mimicked political speeches, Fraser started by generously thanking the organisers for inviting her. Then, parodying the rhetorical mechanisms of art institutions, she impersonates numerous characters including the curator, the trustee, the public official and, finally, the corporate sponsor. For instance, she says:

³²¹ Jerry Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously* (London and New York, Routledge, 1994), pp. 60-61.

³²² Mary Douglas, 'Jokes,' in *Implicit Meanings: Selected Essays in Anthropology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp.150-151.

³²³ Douglas, 'Jokes,' p.152

³²⁴ Andrea Fraser, 'High Time for Humor: Andrea Fraser in Conversation with Judy Batalion,' in *The Laughing Stalk: Live Comedy and Its Audiences*, ed. Judy Batalion (Anderson: Parlor Press, 2012), pp.273-275.

[...] We do want to say a special word of thanks to our board of trustees [...] who have generously volunteered their time, knowledge and wealth, networking, promoting, opening their homes for exclusive parties [...] A black-tie benefit gala that equalled the raw creativity, exuberance and international flavour of the exhibition itself. There was music, dancing, live performance and superb cuisine, all in a lavish and dramatic setting.³²⁵

Fraser demonstrates not only how humour can be used subversively, but also its potential to activate the audience, to encourage participation. Similarly, like in *Two Amerindians*, Gómez-Peña's work depends and feeds on the participation of the audience, an argument that I will further develop throughout this chapter.

Outlining some of the characteristics of humour that punctuates the borderlands, academic Jennifer Alvarez Dickinson, who has delved on Chicano and Latin American humour, writes:

Border humor frequently mines the incongruities between English and Spanish or between perceived differences in Latinos and Anglos for laughs [...] Humor can serve as an aggressive response to derogatory language [...] For Latinos and other ethnic minorities, satire and parody are often used to remind members of shared in-group experiences and cultural symbols in order to foster greater solidarity and social cohesion.³²⁶

Whether or not this cultural characterisation is valid, it is true that humour—especially when politicised—operates on a shared social and linguistic sphere with its own complex set of codes. For Rayner '[...] comedy is bound to its immediate social and linguistic context [...] comedy responds to its immediate milieu more readily than other dramatic and literary forms.'³²⁷ Similarly, philosopher Simon Critchley, in his book *On Humour*, maintains that comedy is highly context-specific, often resists

³²⁵ Andrea Fraser, 'Inaugural Speech,' in *The Laughing Stalk: Live Comedy and Its Audiences*, ed. Judy Batalion (Anderson, Parlor Press, 2012), p.282.

³²⁶ Jennifer Alvarez Dickinson, 'The Latino Comedy Project and Border Humor in Performance,' in *Performing the US Latino and Latino Borderlands*, ed. Arturo J. Aldama, Chela Sandoval and Peter García (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012), pp. 420-421.

³²⁷ Alice Rayner, *Comic Persuasion: Moral Structure in British Comedy From Shakespeare to Stoppard* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1987), p.2.

translations and is a form of cultural ‘insider-knowledge.’³²⁸ He adds that jokes are dependent upon a familiar world and shared practices, and often excavate the meanings hidden in the crevices of culture.³²⁹ He continues, ‘by laughing at power, we expose its contingency, we realize that what appeared to be fixed and oppressive is in fact the emperor’s new clothes, and just the sort of thing that should be mocked and ridiculed.’³³⁰

The origins of these arguments can be traced back to at least the beginning of the 20th century, when French philosopher Henri Bergson pointed out that humour is conspiratorial since ‘laughter is always the laughter of a group,’³³¹ whereby it is ‘[...] above all corrective. Being intended to humiliate it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it [...].’³³² As I have mentioned, Gómez-Peña’s codes are so complex and difficult to read that at times, even those who are familiar with the art’s scene and are bilingual, feel slightly excluded from the group. One laughs and enjoys the show, for it is difficult not to take pleasure in watching others fall into Gómez-Peña’s trap. But that laughter—complicit with Gómez-Peña’s ‘mock surveillance’ strategies—is never entirely free from a web of remorse, since to laugh at others expense, in one way or another, is to indulge in the same kind of ‘superiority complex’ that paradigms of ethnography uphold. This compunction, however, forces us to reflect about the voyeuristic pleasures of observing others being duped (and filmed). This push towards self-reflexivity, perhaps more than anything else, prevents his work from being merely a replication of ethnographical practices.

As such, rather than reading Gómez-Peña’s comedy as vapid entertainment in collusion with mass media, his works are immersed in a confrontational context, one that should be embedded within a postmodernist historical framework. The postmodernist theories that emerged during the 1980s and 1990s often theorised about the subversive and critical power of humour. Kirby Olson, author of *Comedy*

³²⁸ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp.66-67.

³²⁹ Critchley, *On Humour*, p.16.

³³⁰ Critchley, *On Humour*, p.11.

³³¹ Henri L. Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Rockville: Arc Mannor, 2008), p.11.

³³² Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 92.

after Postmodernism, argues that postmodernism and comedy formed an alliance that aimed at dismantling master narratives and that, in a way, 'postmodern philosophers can be seen as comic writers.'³³³ In the last chapter, I noted the relationship that exists between postmodernism and the Bakhtinian carnival by drawing on Ihab Hassan's claim that the carnivalesque could stand for postmodernism itself.³³⁴ Fantasy, play, humour, self-reflexivity, irony, comedy of the absurd are, for Hassan, all markers of a postmodernist turn.³³⁵

The kind of postmodernist and poststructuralist theories that had an impact on Gomez-Peña work dovetail with Craig Owens's essay on the 'allegorical impulse,' published in 1980. For Owens, the allegorical impulse involves a multiplicity of readings, a lack of straightforward readability and translation, a deliberate exploitation of the gap between the signifier and the signified, a pastiche. Allegory functions by splintering the signifier and the signified which, in turn, leads to a multiplicity of readings, creating new meanings by supplanting old ones. Owens uses the work of Laurie Anderson, who started performing in the 1970s, to illustrate his points about the allegory. Many of the strategies that she employs are comparable to those used by Gómez-Peña. For Owens, Anderson's work problematizes the activity of reading and prompts the viewer to lose herself/himself in a maze of convoluted signs.³³⁶

Like Gómez-Peña, Anderson works with a variety of media such as films, music, spoken and written texts, and photographs. Anderson claims that the conservative climate prevailing during the Reagan administration—the time when Gómez-Peña was working under the auspices of the BAW/TAF—prompted her to examine the relationship between politics and pop culture, an exploration that is key in Gómez-Peña's work. She also composed various hit songs, such as 'O Superman', that were

³³³ Kirby Olson, *Comedy after Postmodernism: Rereading Comedy From Edward Lear to Charles Willeford* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2001), p. 6.

³³⁴ Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, p.171.

³³⁵ Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, p. 40.

³³⁶ Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,' in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*, ed. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1992), pp.52-74. Apart from the work of Laurie Anderson, in this essay he also discusses that of Sherry Levine.

quickly absorbed into the mainstream and became very successful. Although Gómez-Peña's work was never as profitable as Anderson's, it inserted itself in this same economy, as his performance *Naftaztec* aired on national television attests to. Her work also explores language, especially in her songs 'Language is a Virus' and 'Language of the Future', and has been connected to the writings of both linguists and philosophers alike, such as Walter Benjamin and Marshal McLuhan.³³⁷ In one of her works, *United States Part 2* of 1980, she included a section on the relationship between nationalism and language. Owens' poststructuralist theory is in sync with both the works of Anderson and Gómez-Peña. The latter has particularly concentrated on projects that attempt to change the way we conceptualise binational relationships and racial differences. His alleged abuse of poststructuralist theories at the expense of criticality —as Saldívar claims—is perhaps better characterised as the result of an optimistic outlook that was engendered by those theories, which became widely popular at the time.

Another postmodernist theorist, Fredric Jameson, notably in his 1984 essay, 'Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism,' points out that late capitalism's complicity in the weakening of historicity resembles the Lacanian schizophrenic who suffers from diverse '[...]pure and unrelated presents in time.'³³⁸ For Jameson, capitalism's excesses have led to the loss of the ability to place ourselves on a historical context. *Naftaztec* convolutes the sense of temporality by placing itself outside any recognisable temporal plane. The title of the work *Naftaztec: Pirate Cyber-TV for A.D.*, and Gómez-Peña's introduction of the show as 'post-CNN' Chicano art, seem to indicate that, much like science fiction, it takes place in the near future. 'Uncle Sam' is delivering a newscast in the future. Yet the technological bric-a-bracs that are shown on the stage, that supposedly control the TV station where the pirate intervention is taking place, are crude and out-dated (**Plate 2.14**). The show is constantly being disrupted with interference, distorted images and old ethnographic footage making the video look home-made, amateurish and technologically obsolete.

³³⁷ Rose Lee Goldberg, *Laurie Anderson* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), pp. 11-17.

³³⁸ Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,' *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 58-72.

Despite the title and the futuristic references, this work visually seems to be located well before 1994, the year it premiered. Yet the temporality of the work is so full of references that it does not allow a straightforward pinpointing of time. In this way, Gómez-Peña's works, operating outside any recognisable temporality, dovetails with Jameson's assertion that capitalism has impeded our ability to think historically. The Naftaztec pirate inflames a general fear of foreign invasion as he takes over the mainstream media and imposes himself on American viewers.

Foster in *The Return of the Real* has criticised Owens' essay on the grounds that it lacks an analysis of capitalism in relation to the allegorical impulse.³³⁹ However, Gómez-Peña does employ many of the characteristics of allegory while at the same time showing a deep concern with capitalism's role in the fragmentation of the social and political matrix. Claiming that Gómez-Peña's work embodies the kind of historical confusion that Jameson broaches would suggest that his work falls into the same pitfalls that he is trying to critique by merely replicating capitalism's logic in his work. But of course, his work is characterised by its trenchant critique of racial Othering and of discrimination, and by its engagement with border politics.

In what follows, I will extend this discussion by examining how Gómez-Peña engages with corporate marketing strategies, including the kind of research performed on 'marginalised groups' by corporations. I will also attempt to contextualise all this within the history of multiculturalism.

Corporate Branding: (Humorously) Marketing Otherness

As I have discussed, Gómez-Peña imitated the kind of work done by ethnographers and, he also parodied and emulated the research undertaken by marketing agencies and corporations, paying particular attention to marketing targeted at 'minority' groups. Corporations seeking to promote their products more effectively quickly embraced the notion of identity for its untapped market potential. In addition, concomitant with the politics of multiculturalism, in the 1980s the 'Latino

³³⁹ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, pp.91-92.

Boom' kicked off in the U.S., marked by the promotion of ethnicity and by the 'difference' hype to which, undoubtedly, Gómez-Peña responded. In 1995 he claimed:

In 1987 [...] we were "discovered" (rediscovered, to be precise). We have been here for more than 2,000 years; yet, according to *Time* magazine and many other publications, we "just broke out of the barrio." Today Latinos are being portrayed as the new 'up and coming' urban sofisticados [sic]. We are suddenly "in," fashionable and grantable, and our ethnicity is being commodified.³⁴⁰

Numerous other theorists have criticised multiculturalism's ethos. For instance, in 1997 philosopher Slavoj Žižek wrote his well-known article 'Multiculturalism, or, The Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism.' As this title suggests, he argued that the logic of multiculturalism is firmly ingrained in the mechanisms of today's global capitalism. Similarly, Paul Gilroy maintains that 'Identity has been taken into the viscera of postmodern commerce' and has been hemmed in along ethnic, racial and national lines.³⁴¹

In a biting critique of multiculturalism and marketing, in 1994 Gómez-Peña and Fusco developed a performance entitled *Ethnic Talent for Export (Performing in Malls)*, presented in, amongst others, the Dufferin Mall in Toronto and the Whiteley's Mall in London. They created a fictitious corporation, 'Mexarcane International (Ethnic Talent for Export).' The 'office', usually located next to the food courts, had a corporate ambience, showing posters of 'natives' spread across the globe, as well as a 'live' exhibit: Gómez-Peña in a cage as a 'multicultural Frankenstein', performing similar tasks to those showcased in *Two Amerindians*. Gómez-Peña recounts how Fusco was dressed as the Aztec girlfriend of Mr. Spock and conducted a poll in which she interviewed and surveyed potential customers asking them to express their 'ethnic' desires. Based on their responses, Fusco would ask Gómez-Peña to give a 'live' performance that would satisfy their customers' fantasies. This illustrates my earlier argument that, as a comedian, he measures the temperature of the audience and

³⁴⁰ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, 'The Multicultural Paradigm: An Open Letter to the National Arts Community,' in *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera (London: inIVA, 1995), p. 189.

³⁴¹ Gilroy, *Against Race*, 98.

improvises his performances accordingly. For instance, he would perform 'shamanistic rituals,' pose in despair for documentary photographers and play 'tribal music.'³⁴²

The commodification of identity made possible by marketing companies has become a complex and highly detailed issue. It can include 'ethnically flavoured' goods and services designed and targeted to Western consumers; multi-ethnic advertisement strategies that corporate America employs to sell those same goods and services to 'minority' groups; and more specific and focused campaigns targeted, to give an example, to newcomer Cuban immigrants settling in Florida. Ethnic marketing specialists have become adept at recognising and studying subtle cultural nuances.³⁴³ As ethnologist Michaela Kehrler pointed out, 'Whilst global capitalism is obviously able to homogenize cultures, it can be demonstrated in the case of specific marketing strategies that it is also very much able to engage in their diversity.'³⁴⁴

Numerous academics have written about the strategies that companies employ in marketing to particular sections of the population. For instance, social activist and author Naomi Klein, in her 2000 book *No Logo*, discussed that during the 1990s marketing strategies increasingly became tied to identity politics, stating that 'The market has seized upon multiculturalism and gender-bending in the same way that it has seized upon youth culture in general—not just a market niche but as a source of new carnivalesque imagery.'³⁴⁵ She added:

But for many of the activists who had, at one point not so long ago, believed that better media representation would make for a more just world, one thing had become abundantly clear: identity politics weren't fighting the system, or even subverting it. When it came to the vast new industry of corporate branding, they were feeding it.³⁴⁶

³⁴²Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Dangerous Border Crossers: The Artist Talks Back* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 70-71.

³⁴³ Marilyn Halter, *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity* (New York: Schocken Books, 2000), pp. 48-75.

³⁴⁴ Michaela Kehrler, 'How Culture Sells: Examples from a National and International Marketing Perspective,' in *Ethnic Marketing*, ed. Tirdad Zolghadr (Zurich: JRP/ Ringier, 2006), p.11.

³⁴⁵ Naomi Klein, *No Space, No Choice, No Jobs: No Logo* (New York: Picador, 2000), p. 115.

³⁴⁶ Klein, *No Logo*, p.113.

In a similar note, Marilyn Halter, who has written on the relationship between marketing and ethnicity, maintained as early as the 1970s that there has been a trend towards looking at our roots and ethnicity as a means of escaping from the de-individualising effects of the postmodern world but that, in turn, the marketplace has found a way of providing the products that make such a 'return' possible. She further explains that '[...] although the impetus to reclaim roots often stems from disdain for commercial interests, paradoxically, consumers look to the marketplace to revive and re-identify with ethnic values.'³⁴⁷ Indeed, ethnic marketing has become a powerful industry that brings in experts to empirically investigate attitudes and preferences of particular groups.³⁴⁸

Looking specifically at the 'Latino' market, Arlene Dávila, an anthropologist who specialises in marketing strategies designed for Latinos in the U.S., remarks that research done on this section of the population has rocketed since the 1980s. This was not only because politicians were trying to court an ascendant pool of voters but also, and even more importantly, because the corporate sphere early on recognised the potential of this lucrative market, which was subsequently probed and tested empirically, and defined by cultural markers which were often distilled into clichés. Reading some of the marketing handbooks that advise companies as to how to target particular populations reveals not only the ideological underpinnings behind 'ethnic marketing,' but also how they employ methodologies of participant observation. For example, the authors of a 1995 book entitled *Hispanic Market Handbook* wrote: 'The marketing challenge for companies wishing to sell to the Hispanic market is not only to identify Hispanics but also to determine how they are different from non-Hispanics as well as how homogenous they are as a group.'³⁴⁹ The book covers a wide range of subjects: studies on where Hispanic wealth is concentrated and how to distinguish subtle differences between Latino groups as well as how to understand language usage, habits regarding TV and general media, and attitudes towards gender differences. The ninth chapter details how to conduct market research including '[...]

³⁴⁷ Halter, *Shopping for Identity*, p. 13.

³⁴⁸ Halter, *Shopping for Identity*, pp.48-59.

³⁴⁹ M. Isabel Valdés and Marta H. Seoane, *Hispanic Market Handbook: The Definitive Source for Reaching this Lucrative Segments of American Consumers* (Detroit: Gale Research Inc. Staff, 1995), p. 3.

dealing with over-positive or non-critical responses typical of Hispanic consumers.³⁵⁰ Telephone vs. door-to-door interviewing is taken into consideration as well as how to minimise bias on the part of the researcher. The authors 'recognise' that '[a]s the second, third, and fourth generation of Hispanics acculturate, the strength of ethnic identification shifts'³⁵¹ and that '[i]n general, Hispanics are inquisitive and talkative, so the interviewing process will take more time.'³⁵² It is not hard to see why, at the very least, such marketing dilutes a complex and variegated issue by 'studying down' a population into a set of frankly disparaging set of rigid parameters.

Gómez-Peña was acutely aware of the marketing for Latin American ethnicity in both the cultural and the corporate spheres. Thus, in a 1991 performance entitled *Son of Border Crisis* he claimed that '[t]hanks to marketing and not to civil rights we are the new generation[...] of laboratory rats and experimental patients.' In *Ethnic Talent for Export*, he attempted to put such 'marketing mechanisms'—including the use of opinion polls and hearing feedback from his audience—to 'good use.' Not only did he pose as a 'multicultural Frankenstein' and perform according to the audience's 'ethnic desires', he also pretended to be a salesman, promoting products like Chile shampoo, 'pre-Columbian' condoms and other 'organic' products such as 'Ancient Grains' cereal.³⁵³

In *The Temple of Confessions*—where he also puts marketing gambits under the microscope—Gómez-Peña argues that he is a 'generic Benetton primitive' rather than a typified subjectivity.³⁵⁴ Many of the characters I have mentioned above respond to the audiences' desires and expectations regarding an 'ethnographic specimen.' Rather than being stereotypical Mexicans, conforming to hegemonic forms of racial Othering, they are a concoction of different elements that respond to the perceived fantasies of Western consumers—or at least, to what the artist believes them to be. In the first

³⁵⁰ Valdés and Seoane, *Hispanic Market Handbook*, p. 371.

³⁵¹ Valdés and Seoane, *Hispanic Market Handbook*, p. 374.

³⁵² Valdés and Seoane, *Hispanic Market Handbook*, p.382.

³⁵³ Arlene Dávila, *Latino Spin: Public Image and the Whitewashing of Race* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2008), pp. 71-87.

³⁵⁴ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *The Temple of Confessions: Mexican Beasts and Living Santos* (New York: Powerhouse, 1996), p.18.

chapter of this dissertation I discussed the BAW/TAF's engagement with 'stereotypes' about the Mexican-U.S. border and argued that these were more akin to carnivalesque characters than to clichés. In Gómez-Peña's works during the 1990s, he took the carnivalesque a step further to create characters that do not belong to any locatable culture. He not only makes references to Mexican and American cultural markers, and to science fiction characters, but he also speaks French and creates fictitious cultures such as the Guatinauis. Unlike the carnivalesque characters of the BAW/TAF, his new characters are moulded and shaped according to the polls and observation data that Gómez-Peña collects from his audiences' responses. He quasi-empirically tests the 'desires' of audiences, emulating marketing research, in order to create a fictitious subjectivity that will perform well in a capitalist market.

In a performance mentioned at the start of this chapter, entitled *The Ethno-Cyberpunk Trading Post & Curio Shop on the Electronic Frontier*, Gómez-Peña allowed visitors to watch the performers change into a variety of 'ethnic costumes' and to exhibit various 'anthropological' paraphernalia. The room was also filled with computer screens, video monitors, neon signs and digital bars flashing taxonomic descriptions of the ethnographic specimens. Working in conjunction with this performance, and in a similar fashion to the *Temple of Confessions* that McGahan analysed, a website was set up that contained an 'ethnographic questionnaire' where users shared their views about Latinos. Sifuentes, together with a filmmaker, videotaped the performance and aired it on the live website.³⁵⁵ Users were invited to send files with pictures, sound or texts '[...] that expressed how they felt Mexicans, Chicanos and Native Americans of the 90s should look, behave and perform.'³⁵⁶ One user claimed that 'Mexicans cost too much money to educate and acculturate.' Another remarked 'Put a stop to immigration! We have enough colored people.'³⁵⁷ The way in which Gómez-Peña allows audience members to participate online creates a different

³⁵⁵ Gómez-Peña, *Dangerous Border Crossers*, pp. 38-58.

³⁵⁶ Gómez-Peña, *Dangerous Border Crossers*, p. 47.

³⁵⁷ Gómez-Peña, *Dangerous Border Crossers*, p. 58.

(virtual) 'site' of engagement establishing a multi-layered site that, in the words of Kwon, becomes a 'sequence of events and actions *through spaces*'³⁵⁸

This online questionnaire also replicated the strategies used to create *vox pop* that I described earlier. Manipulated by Roberto Sifuentes, these responses were showcased in the monitors for all the audience to see, but they also functioned as cues for Gómez-Peña and Luna who tried to improvise their performance in order to act out the 'fantasies' of their cyber-audience. Some users described what they wished the performers to do, and both artists put this into practice. The online questionnaire facilitates creates a dialogue between virtual and physical or 'actual' sites reconfiguring the relationship between 'live' performance and place. Gómez-Peña claimed that perhaps the Internet and its supposed anonymity provided the necessary courage for people to reveal their fantasies. Although the performance lasted only a week, the installation remained and the website was maintained for a year. It received around 20,000 hits.

Interestingly, 'shockvertising', as a marketing tactic is popularly known, often includes the use of highly polemical humour that attempts to shock audiences in order to increase both attention and memory retention.³⁵⁹ Fred K. Beard, author of *Humor in the Advertising Business*, explains that 'Advertisers started using potentially offensive themes for the same reason they originally began using humor—to cut through the clutter and get attention [...] advertising professionals and researchers agree that humor effectively attracts attention, and attention and awareness are the objectives best achieved by humor. [...] People enjoy humor and their enjoyment is linked to increased liking for both ads and brands.'³⁶⁰ Andrea Fraser's performances discussed earlier on are not only easy to remember, funny and 'catching' but, by parodying institutions, she underlines the often invisible pecuniary mechanisms that drive the art world. Equally, Gómez-Peña's uses humour, mimicking the type of advertising strategies of marketing agencies and corporations, in order to subvert them and, hopefully, offer a 'memorable' experience.

³⁵⁸ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p.29.

³⁵⁹ Fred K. Beard, *Humor in the Advertising Business: Theory, Practice, and Wit* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto and Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), pp. 135-137.

³⁶⁰ Beard, *Humor in the Advertising Business*, pp. 137-138.

To conclude this section, my argument is that in the performances I have examined here attempt to mimic the kind of research that is done by corporations to promote commodities to a particular group. Gómez-Peña was trying to show that, in regards to methods of gathering public opinion, both capitalism and multiculturalism are complicit. He tries and tests propositions (quasi) empirically by responding to his audience directly addressing the marketing research directed towards the Latino population that Dávila describes. The interactive displays, engagement with the audience, customisation of their products to a particular audience, all fit the parameters of marketing strategies. In what follows, I will analyse these marketing strategies but in relation to the entertainment industry that includes the commodification of history.

‘Ethnic Festivals:’ The Experience Economy and the Marketing of History

Marilyn Halter describes the so-called ‘ethnic festivals’ that have become popular in the last couple of decades. They consist of a ‘public display of romance with ethnicity,’ one that has been co-opted by corporations trying to reach certain segments of the population. She further expounds:

Typically the outcome of a combination of commercial, civic, and cultural resources [...] these festivals have become paradigmatic events to celebrate cultural diversity. In market world of the ethnic festival, it is not at all unusual for corporate [...] penny-capitalist, and non-profit interests to be brought together for the enjoyment of locals and tourists [...]³⁶¹

In this section I will explore the notion that Gómez-Peña not only parodied the commodification of difference, as it materialises in ‘ethnic festivals’, but that he created and marketed an experience in itself, an experience not dissimilar to that resulting from the corporate influence on museums, in tune with his interest in critiquing institutions. I will also consider his work in relation to the recent attention

³⁶¹ Halter, *Shopping for Identity*, p. 92.

that has been paid to questions of re-enactment of both history and memory, drawing on art historian Rebecca Schneider's recently published book *Performing Remains*.

Artists before Gómez-Peña have tried to render conspicuous the link between the corporate sphere and the of art institutions. For instance, artist Claes Oldenburg assembled for his installation *Mouse Museum* (1965-1977) (**Plate 2.15**) a range of objects usually associated with mass culture—not dissimilarly to Broodthaers. In a freestanding structure he displayed found objects, such as clothing remnants, cosmetics and tools, as well as sculptures made by the artist of a mundane or mass-produced nature, including food or pictures of food and representations of buildings. The layout of the exhibition had the shape of the iconic Mickey Mouse silhouette, mocking the entanglement of 'high art' with mass-produced culture.³⁶²

Pine and Gilmore, two businessmen, have developed a useful concept they call 'the experience economy' which, according to them, is different from both the goods and the services economy. It relies on engaging the viewer and offering *memorable* experiences. They cite examples such as theme parks, virtual reality, and casinos, among others.³⁶³ Historical archaeologist Martin Hall analyses Pine and Gilmore's notion of the 'experience economy' in relation to museums today. He maintains that Pine and Gilmore's notion of the 'experience economy' is deeply inserted within the current cultural sphere and suggests that whereas museums in the 19th century adopted a metanarrative of civilisation's upward progress and tried to educate and shape the audience's viewpoint, museums today start with '[...] the individual, offering [...] the fantasy of a customized world, the opportunity to be who they want [...] This is Foucault's penal institution inverted, the camera inside the prison walls [...]'³⁶⁴ All of Gómez-Peña's performances mentioned so far involve just that—offering indelible experiences based on the encounter with the 'Other.' Often in his performances the

³⁶² Kynaston McShine, 'Introduction,' in *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, ed. Kynaston McShine (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), p.11.

For a complete inventory of the Mouse Museum see Claes Oldenburg, *Mouse Museum/Ray Gun Wing* (Otterlo: Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, 1979).

³⁶³ Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theater and Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), pp. 1-26.

³⁶⁴ Martin Hall, 'The Reappearance of the Authentic,' in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/ Global Transformations*, ed. Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 77-81.

audience can take a memento, like in *Two Amerindians*—often taking place in renowned tourist destinations—where for a dollar the public could take a picture of themselves next to the Guatinauis. In the *Temple of Confessions*, Lorena Orozco, one of Gómez-Peña's collaborators, gave the audience souvenirs such as stones, amulets and various herbs that are associated with Mexican witchcraft. If you buy Gómez-Peña's book of *The Temple of Confessions* you also get a CD, a postcard where you can mail your 'confessions,' a tattoo that you can rub on, as well as a link to a (now extinct) website. Museums have become 'events' rather than mere displays, where educational 'experiences' such as symposia, performances, lectures, openings and tours have become routine. Museums (and culture) have thus gone through a process of 'Disneyfication' and 'popularization' that Oldenburg points to. They operate under similar terms that corporations, joining in the 'experience economy' that Gómez-Peña's work both replicates and critiques.

Not only are the documents and souvenirs that preserve it but also memory itself has become a highly valuable commodity, especially in the tourist industry, as *Ethnic Talent for Export* seems to highlight. Rebecca Schneider, an art historian who has recently written a book about re-enactment in performance art, claims that memory has become 'the most precious vanishing commodity on earth.'³⁶⁵ Museums, theme parks and historical TV shows offer a form of time travel where the past becomes 'the stuff of the future, laid out like game show prizes for potential (re)encounter.'³⁶⁶ The past is therefore commodified, packaged and sold as an experience. Participants in re-enactments, according to Schneider, do not suffer from a 'cannibalizing of history', as Jameson theorises; rather, they suffer from a sense that the past is an entity that constantly disappears and has to be pursued. Discussing Civil War re-enactments—where participants act out, often with great precision, a battle of that time—Schneider maintains that, for the participant in such events, they are about much more than mere remembering. They re-create a historical event as if it were still

³⁶⁵ Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 24.

³⁶⁶ Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p.24.

ongoing, hence brokering a melange of past and present. The past is therefore temporally always on the move.

In my first chapter I argued that the BAW/TAF's *The End of the Line* was akin to a performative temporality of the nation-state. I also pointed out that this was related to Homi Bhabha's hypothesis that history, rather than being a form of linear accumulation, is open to be revisited and reworked. Gómez-Peña works can be examined in this context. In a chapter of the broadcast entitled 'Unleashing the Demons of History', *Naftaztec* claims that 'the U.S. suffers from a severe case of amnesia. In its obsessive quest to construct the future it tends to forget or erase the past.' Following Gómez-Peña's logic, the image of America is anchored on the notion of a 'new' and 'youthful' country, fertile for new beginnings. This mythic creation depends substantially on historically erasing the fact that such romantic notions were made possible because of the massive genocide of the Indians, and two and a half centuries of slavery.

But Gómez-Peña's engagement with marketing strategies, with the effects of NAFTA, and with poststructuralist and postmodernist theories, adds another layer to the BAW/TAF's original political project. While Schneider predominantly refers to re-enactments that try to faithfully recreate an event in the past, Gómez-Peña offers a type of re-enactment that is firmly rooted in parody and humour. Like *The End of the Line*, which took place on Columbus' day, many of Gómez-Peña's works occur on or near an important, often commemorative, event. Thus *Two Amerindians* responded to the quincentenary celebrations of the discovery of America, a point rendered conspicuous by Fusco who, sitting down with legs crossed, was casually flipping through an illustrated Christopher Columbus magazine while performing at the Smithsonian Institute. *The Temple of Confessions* premiered two days prior to the U.S. presidential election and *Naftaztec* was aired on Thanksgiving Day. It is as if he provides an alternative, more critical way of marking events: not to commemorate but rather to foreground, via parody, the problems of idealised and institutionalised historical events. Returning to Mary Douglas, she usefully writes that 'the rite imposes order and harmony, while the joke "disorganises [...and] attacks sense and

hierarchy.”³⁶⁷ In *Naftaztec* Gómez-Peña was trying to remind viewers not to be deluded by the historical myth behind the holiday, in which Pilgrims and Native Americans peacefully shared a celebratory meal. In *The Temple of Confessions* he went to Washington D.C. near Election Day to give a voice to a group that is often underrepresented in the electorate. In that performance, he made a life-sized jello human body, laid to rest in a flag-like red, white and blue coffin structure, prompting everyone in the audience to share and enjoy in equal parts, claiming from the start: ‘We are here in the capital of the American crisis, in the very centre of the wound [...]we are here precisely to either dispel this fear [of Latinos] or to confirm it.’

Both history and memory have become commodities, packaged and sold, circulating freely in the ‘experience economy.’ Gómez-Peña replicates this process not by faithfully re-enacting historical events but by creating wholly new ones, trying to rewrite historical relations. Outside a temporal and spatial plane, the experiences become layers of ‘simultaneous elsewheres’ that do not fail to make a strong impression on the audience. They offer the audiences an option to revisit and change their neo-colonialist, racist and xenophobic beliefs, by creating new memories and different histories. By tampering with the notion of linear temporality, as Schneider points out, he pokes and probes a historical ‘unadulterated’ narrative that can exist only in fiction.³⁶⁸

Schneider discusses a non-profit company in Colorado named ‘You can Live History’ which offers customers —schools and corporations, among many others— the opportunity to re-enact any historical events they ask for. She argues that the heritage industry necessitates ‘you’ not only in the starring role, but to ensure history’s futurity. Thus history has become a commodified experience rather than knowledge etched into memory. Schneider goes on to claim:

History is not remembered [...] as it was, but experienced as it will become. It must be acquired, purchased, begun again and again. A nation of futurity is here, still, a nation without reminiscences—unless reminiscence is

³⁶⁷ Douglas, ‘Jokes,’ pp.155-156.

³⁶⁸ Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p. 28.

relieved as now, acquired (purchased even, copyrighted) as affective 'present time' experience, beginning again.³⁶⁹

Earlier I argued that the performance *Naftaztec* existed in a separate temporal plane that belonged neither to the past nor to the future (even though the title clearly states that it took place in 2000 AD). Schneider contends that the existence of companies like 'You can Live History', and new products developed by technology, have made it impossible to always be located exactly in time or place. We are now always capable of 'simultaneous elsewheres.' At the beginning of *Naftaztec*, Gómez-Peña introduces a device he calls TECHNOPAL 2000 that can:

[...] Turn my memories into video images *ipso facto*. I can retrieve any episode of my life, any persona I was ever involved with, any persona or hidden self that exists within me or any historical event involving my family, my *raza*, the Chicano/Mexicano communities in the U.S. [...] and on top of that I can edit these memories on the spot and turn them into video footage [...] soon my video memories will also be yours.

In the performance, Gómez-Peña places this 'device' on Sifuentes' head. Sifuentes then finds himself caught in a whirlpool of different nightmares: he gets cuffed by the border patrol, he is pursued by a 'migra' helicopter and finally, he finds himself as the gardener of Pete Wilson³⁷⁰ who, he learns, killed his previous gardener. Sifuentes repeatedly asks Gómez-Peña to 'change the channel' because what he was experiencing was 'too real.' This event dovetails with Jacques Derrida's notion of the police when he writes:

[...] The police [...] do not simply consist of policemen in uniform [...] By definition, the police are present or represented everywhere there is force of law [...] They are present, sometimes invisible but always effective[...] the police [...] is a figure without face or figure, a violence that is formless

³⁶⁹ Schneider, *Performing Remains*, pp. 24-25.

³⁷⁰ Pete Wilson was the Governor of California from 1991-1999. He floated Proposition 187 that I referred to above in this chapter.

[...] The police become hallucinatory [...] because they haunt everything; they are everywhere even where they are not.³⁷¹

Although these are not memories of historical events, Sifuentes does enact certain episodes of Gómez-Peña's life that, with TECHNOPAL, can be re-edited and reworked. This video also includes other 'ethnographic footage' but, unlike *Two Amerindians*, the events are fictitious. The artist himself creates them. For example, one footage called 'First Encounters: "Conquista Go-Go" Music Video!!' supposedly takes place in central Mexico in 1512 AD, and is created by 'La Comisión Me Cago en el Quinto Centenario' (The Commission I Shit on the Quincentenary Celebrations). This consists of several young women dancing in bikinis—one called 'Miss Discovery'—flanked by 'natives' dancing with staffs and 'Hawaiian' skirts (**Plate 2.16**). A scene quickly followed this where Gómez-Peña, dressed as an Indian, is in a battle with a Conquistador. Two cameramen—a man dressed as a colonial bishop and another sporting golden wings—were also displayed filming the staged battle (**Plate 2.17**). There is a voiceover of a man with an affected 'French accent' who narrates the scene, explaining that 'historically speaking' there has been an ongoing clash between Latinos and Europeans and, more recently, between Mexicans and Americans. Later in *Naftaztec*, Gómez-Peña shows footage of his own performances, of his apartment in Mexico City as well as videos of his family in the 1950s.

Gómez-Peña's memories and historical events are shown alongside each other as if to form a continuum. How are history and memory related, if at all, in his performances? If history is something that is enacted rather than remembered, has memory followed suit? With TECHNOPAL, as Gómez-Peña asserts, memories can be turned into experiences, even bodily acts, rather than images. Schneider contends that memory and history, if not fully coalesced, have become symbiotic, constituting a form of 'bodily knowledge.' 'Physical acts', maintains Schneider, 'are a means for knowing.'³⁷² TECHNOPAL functions as a metaphor for a collective memory of the

³⁷¹Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: "The Mystical Foundation of Authority,"' in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 278-280.

³⁷² Schneider, *Performing Remains*, p.38.

persecution suffered by illegal migrants residing in the United States and of the violence that the police (in the Derridean sense) exerts but it also points to the memory's elasticity and its ability to change through experience—Gómez-Peña clearly states that it can 'edit' memories. Similarly, as the battle between the Conquistador and Gómez-Peña indicates, history is malleable. Memory, like history, is presented as an entity that is not cornered into the past; rather it is an itinerant, an ongoing process that shifts and morphs as it travels through time.

In *Naftaztec*, like in the video *The Couple in The Cage* and many other video works made in conjunction with his performances, Gómez-Peña often shows 'found' 'ethnographic footage'—rarely labelled—that he satirically crafts, as well as footage relating to his personal life or work. Thus he seamlessly weaves fact, personal stories and fiction to create his performances. All of the footage shown in his work is there to disavow the alleged transparency of cultural forms of representation. This disavowal is conspicuous in the battle between the Conquistador and Gómez-Peña being filmed by a 'bishop' in *Naftaztec*—revealing and mocking the mechanisms and technologies that produce historical documents. It is also conspicuous in the so-called found 'freak show' footage that interrupts Gómez-Peña and Fusco's performance in *The Couple in the Cage* (**Plate 2.18**). Film professor Catherine Russell, who wrote a book entitled *Experimental Ethnography*, argues that ethnographic films that contain 'found' footage, only obscure the filmmaker's 'having been there', and render history itself as 'lost,' a parallel temporal plane that only exists through the traces that remain. Collective history can only take place in the present, as memory, rather than 'past as origin.'³⁷³

Gómez-Peña effectively creates a satirical and mock ethnographic archive in his film. It is as if by parodying ethnographic archives he places more importance on performing a historical or personal event—the kind of 'bodily knowledge' that Schneider describes—than on any physical trace created by the event. By including several personal anecdotes in his writings he seems to suggest that the way that history is conceived is always contingent on personal experiences. Diana Taylor, who

³⁷³ Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 241

has written extensively on Latin American performance art, refers to the difference between what she calls 'archival memory' and the 'repertoire.' 'Archival memory' is, of course, the historical knowledge obtained from traces whether they be documents, films, literary texts or anthropological artefacts, which become the object of knowledge, ripe for classification, analysis and interpretation. The 'repertoire,' on the other hand, involves embodied and ephemeral knowledge that includes orality, performance and dance. Epistemologically, the 'repertoire' is always perceived as underprivileged compared to the document.³⁷⁴

Taylor argues that, during the Conquest, 'archival memory' was given precedence not only because of its enduring attributes, but also because it had been mobilised to undermine the repertoire. The repertoire tends to complicate historical memories, since it is repeated time and again, moulded and bent by the mouths of different orators throughout time: spectators, witnesses, participants and listeners have all had a part to play, adding layer upon layer of meaning. As Taylor claims, '[m]ultiple forms of embodied acts are always present, though in a constant state of againness,'³⁷⁵ a proposition that is in line with Schneider's argument. In this sense, history and memory have indeed fully coalesced. During the Conquest, autochthonous forms of preserving and transmitting knowledge were crushed and undermined—in fact, Mayan and Aztec codices and books were destroyed in an attempt to radically erase any archival traces. Ironically, seen in this light, the repertoire may be more resistant to destruction than the archive as it indelibly resides in the memory of those who transmit its narrative. In colonial times writing was only taught to a few carefully selected men who the Spaniards believed would successfully transmit their evangelical writings to the rest of the population. Spanish writers at the time of the Conquest tended to ignore in their writings the native resident's practices in an effort to sever the chain of historical narratives and impose their own.³⁷⁶ 'Preservation' in these writings was, almost paradoxically, a form of colonial erasure of unwanted practices. In *Naftaztec*, the mock Spanish bishop—dressed very similarly to Michael

³⁷⁴ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 19-20.

³⁷⁵ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, p.21.

³⁷⁶ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, pp. 40-42.

Schnorr's colonial outfit in *The End of the Line*—is the one who is doing the recording and therefore is situated in the powerful position of the narrator.

Although Gómez-Peña's work is usually considered to be 'performance art,' many of his works are either adapted into video form, like *Two Amerindians*, or consist of entirely a video, such as *Naftaztec*. In this sense, he transmits his work both as an archival entity (video) and as a repertoire (live performance), hybridising the two forms. In one of his performances, that was subsequently turned into a video, he claims that:

I never document my work. The only archives of my performances are in the FBI and I am a bit too shy to ask them for copies. Can anyone document me please? Can anyone take a photo of this memorable occasion for the archives of border culture, for the history of performance art? Can anyone be so kind as to authenticate my existence?

Of course, Gómez-Peña is very adept at publicising his work in more than one way: he not only writes about it but he also creates videos of his performances and transmits them via television. In this sense, his work does freely circulate in the image economy that he so ardently attempts to criticise. Yet his statement highlights a few important points. The fact that he claims that an American governmental organ has hijacked his 'archives' resonates with colonial practices of controlling knowledge. When he claims that he needs a physical trace to 'document' his existence, he underlines the traditional hegemonic status of archival versus performative knowledge, but one where disenfranchised groups have historically had a restricted participation. Like *The Couple in The Cage* and *Temple of Confessions*, a substantial part of his work is centred on critiquing forms of preserving knowledge—particularly museums functioning as archives. Almost paradoxically, he seems to have developed many simultaneous strategies that help him propagate his work. But perhaps the most effective way to open an arena for discussion is to circulate in the market economy rather than to be isolated from it, while still militating against it.

Conclusion

Gómez-Peña's work offers a model of assessing 'public opinion' that, although different from conventional methods, is also fraught with blind spots: it too relies on a slippery definition of public opinion, functions as a form of surveillance and, due to the scarce amount of participants, is limited in its scope. But it is his self-reflexivity, together with his surrendering of any claim to objectivity, that offers alternative insights into ethnography's methodology and, more generally, to the study of general attitudes towards race and nationality. He also endeavours to expose the lack of impartiality that is inherent in the methods of assessing public opinion, including the media's role in constructing it. His concern with popular culture, capitalism's role in compromising historical memory and the politics of exhibition display, respond to—and, in my view, advance—postmodernist theories written and propagated during the 1980s. Although his work can be said to insert itself willingly into the mechanisms of capitalist ideology and practice, he struggles to supplant them through a scathing and sophisticated critique couched in parody.

When Foster wrote 'The Artist as Ethnographer' in 1995, the debates on multiculturalism and identity politics were still of prime concern in cultural, artistic and social circles especially in the North America and Europe. Gómez-Peña's work and its concern for racial politics can be read as a clear response and a contributor to these debates. Now, as evidenced by the 'documentary turn' that I will discuss in detail in the next chapter, attention has shifted from ethnic alterity in the so-called 'developed' world to those that have suffered under the conditions of economic globalisation. This is not to say that these conditions are not still deeply entangled in the toxic web of race and ethnicity but living conditions of deskilled labour, violent conflicts, patterns of migration, amongst many others, have taken precedence in the art world over the concerns that Foster describes in his essay. Yet, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter in relation to Balibar's discussion of violence and borders, the splinter of identity should not be plucked from the fabric of structural violence that makes the formation of *collective* identities structured around paradigms of exclusion and

national communal feelings possible, for these constitute some of the main pillars of narratives of the nation-state.

Today, Gómez-Peña continues making performance art much in the same format he did in the 1990s—collaboratively, using poststructuralist humour, wearing elaborate costumes, among others—but has adapted his strategies to accommodate more recent political events, particularly the aftermath of 9/11.³⁷⁷ His practice is still ultimately hinged in the politics of identity aiming to release it from the heavy weights of its monolithic representations. The inclusion of Gómez-Peña's work in relation to identity politics in this dissertation reinforces the importance that identity still plays in contemporary politics, regardless of the fact that other 'turns' in the art world have displaced this crucial topic from the spotlight. All of this is not to say that we should not keep in mind some of the critiques launched at the development of identity politics including the commodification of identity and difference, the exoticising and romanticising of diverse cultures perceived by a particular group as 'other,' and the narcissistic practice of indulging in the psychic splits caused by a sense of deracination. Rather, by revisiting these practices forged in the cauldron of multiculturalism of the 1980s and 1990s, I want to dismiss any claims that we live in a 'post-identitarian' world or that we are 'beyond identity.'

³⁷⁷ For more information on Gómez-Peña's recent performances, see his website www.pochanostra.com [Date accessed: 26th of April 2013].

Chapter Three

Representing Femicide and the Im(mobilities) of Assembly-line Work: Listening to the Movements of Corporate Globalisation in Ursula Biemann's *Performing the Border*

There is an inherent violence in today's geopolitical order. Slavoj Žižek's concept of 'systemic violence' aptly captures the violent set of relations that characterises the contemporary neoliberalist system that fosters unequal set of relationse. Systemic violence, for Žižek, is embedded within the capitalist system and is:

[...]like the notorious "dark matter" in physics, the counterpart to an all-too-visible subjective violence [...] *Systemic* violence [is...] inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence [...] It is the self-propelling metaphysical dance of capital that runs the show[...]³⁷⁸

In this chapter I will focus on Swiss artist and academic Ursula Biemann's video essay *Performing the Border* (1999) that analyses the 'systemic violence' that characterises the current conditions of economic globalisation. This work consists both of footage shot and appropriated during her trip to Ciudad Juárez one year earlier—a border city that neighbours the Texan city of El Paso—four years after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed into effect. Documenting the brutal working conditions in sweatshops located in northern Mexico (commonly known as *maquiladoras*), she investigates the poor living and working conditions of women that are tolerated—arguably even fostered—by governmental and corporate bodies in order to sustain the current Mexican and American economic and political relations.

Biemann claimed that her aim for this video essay was:

³⁷⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideway Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2008), pp. 2-11.

[...] to combine a materialist perspective on international division of labor with a more discursive approach to the kinds of subjectivity, identity, and sexuality that are forming in these transnational zones[...] I try to think through the different kinds of subjectivities produced on the border through representations, work conditions, the public sphere, and the kinds of trajectories women trace in the move through these transnational spaces.³⁷⁹

In order to accomplish these aims, Biemann focuses predominantly on deskilled labour conditions and the lifestyle of female workers employed in maquiladoras.³⁸⁰ The video-essay opens with a scene of the maquiladoras in Ciudad Juárez, taken inside a moving car, whilst slow paced electronic music is playing the background. Several interviews—often conducted inside moving cars—are interspersed in this forty-minute long work with computer generated images, archival footage, military night-vision shots as well as company advertisements and television commercials. Close images of maps depicting the borderlands, scenes showing women during the 1980s going to work for the maquiladoras, footage taken from inside these sweatshop plants, black and white videos of women partying in nightclubs in Ciudad Juárez, as well as people crossing the border by both land and water. Some of the interviewees include activists, maquila workers, prostitutes, journalists and academics. Biemann and Berta Jottar—an artist and academic specialising on Latino studies, as well as a former member of the Border Arts Workshop—are the main narrators of the video-essay.

Biemann indirectly responds, in my view, to a call made by artist and writer Allan Sekula who, also involved in issues of representation in relation to labour, has expressed a strong yearning for an art that:

[...]Documents monopoly capitalism's inability to deliver the conditions of a fully human life [...] Against violence directed at the human body, [...] at working people's ability to control their own lives, we need to counterpose an active resistance, simultaneously political and symbolic, to monopoly

³⁷⁹ Ursula Biemann, 'Free Zone Plan,' in *Been There and Back to Nowhere: Gender in Transnational Spaces*, ed. Stephan Geene (Berlin and Brooklyn: B_Books, 2000), p. 8.

³⁸⁰ Ursula Biemann, 'Performing the Border: On Gender, Transnational Bodies and Technology,' in *Globalization on the Line: Culture, Capital and Citizenship at the U.S. Borders*, ed. Claudia Sadowski-Smith (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p.107.

capitalism's increasing power and arrogance, a resistance aimed ultimately at socialist transformation.³⁸¹

In order to explore how Biemann's *Performing the Border* documents the negative and violent effects of capitalism of the kind that Sekula points to, I will start by contextualising both her written and visual work within what critics and curators have called 'the documentary turn' that, broadly, has witnessed an expansion of the category of 'the documentary' to better represent the complex and often repressive reality that characterises life under the conditions of late capitalism. Arguing that the documentary turn can be productively made to intersect within site-oriented practices, I will pay particular attention to Biemann's ample writings on her own work, including her discussion on how digital video technology has enabled her to capture the increasingly complex flows and relationships forged, broken and redirected by the forces of neoliberalism and corporate globalisation. Through a complex layering of images, Biemann shows how space is moulded to suit the interests of economic globalisation. In what follows, I will embed Biemann's work within a feminist context—particularly 'third wave feminism'—arguing that both her visual and written work adds to our understanding of the relationship between gender and capital. After looking at feminist theorists that have informed Biemann's project—namely, Donna Haraway, Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti—I will give a brief account of the history and working conditions of maquiladoras. Next, I will discuss Biemann's complex strategies for representing deskilled and feminised labour, an investigation that, as Sekula and others have pointed out, has been distressingly lacking in today's visual culture. At the same time, I discuss her portrayal of labour through the lens of Biemann's self-reflexive concern surrounding the politics of representation. Finally and perhaps most importantly, I will unpack how Biemann's use of digital technology, recurrent images showcasing various forms of transport, together with appropriated footage taken from inside maquiladora plants, effectively represents the seeming contradiction between the immobilities imposed on the

³⁸¹ Allan Sekula, 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (notes on the Politics of Representation),' in *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973-1983* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), p.74.

female body by tedious assembly line work and the hypermobility of capitalism. To briefly elaborate, Biemann showcases different types of bodily and transport mobilities (or lack thereof) throughout the video-essay: bodily mobility through the small gestures of assembling electronics in the maquilas and through the inclusion of numerous scenes of women dancing in Juárez's nightclubs; prosthetic mobility enabled by buses and cars, underlined by scenes that show women's long journeys to work every morning on poorly designed and funded transport infrastructure; and crucially, Biemann's underscoring of the hypermobility of capital that, at least in this particular context, needs to lock deskilled labour into place in order to function smoothly. Drawing on French philosopher Henri Lefebvre's posthumously published book *Rhythmanalysis* (1992), I will also argue that Biemann represents the oppressive conditions of assembly line labour through a complex array of sounds, images, rhythms and writings that capture the nuances of neoliberalism in a way that mass media fails to do.

Acknowledging the Limits of Representation: The Documentary and Ethnographic Turn

During the last couple of decades, there has been a sustained effort from both artists and critics to unpack and add critical complexity to the documentary form. This effort has been catalysed and prompted by numerous exhibitions, notably by Documenta XI of 2002, that consisted mainly of films, video and digital installations that critically interrogated contemporary reality and its representation under the conditions of late capitalism.³⁸² The exhibition's curator, Okwui Enwezor, pointed out that this politically conscious show signalled the 'culmination of a development in contemporary art in which the documentary form increasingly became the dominant artistic language [...] that perplexed many critics as it disturbed the 'traditional

³⁸² Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, 'Ordering the Universe: Documenta 11 and the Apotheosis of the Occidental Gaze,' *Art Journal* 64 (2005): 83.

understanding of what the work of art is.’³⁸³ Although her video-essay was not shown in this exhibition, Biemann’s work formed part of and contributed to this trend through her sophisticated work that productively wove the personal with the political, fact with fiction and innovatively digitally altered found footage to effectively manoeuvre her intricate arguments.

Artists grouped under the documentary and ethnographic turn—despite diverse approaches like Biemann and Gómez-Peña’s—share an interest in specific sites and often endorse the participant-observation methodology that characterises ethnographic practices. ‘The ethnographic turn,’ as Hal Foster anxiously points out in ‘The Artist as Ethnographer,’ also provoked numerous arguments about interdisciplinary incursions into the field of art that questioned ‘what the work of art is.’ Biemann undertakes an ethnographic approach similar to the one that Foster describes in his essay since, amongst other strategies, she adopts ‘[...] fieldwork in which theory and practice seem to be reconciled.’³⁸⁴ To be sure, in order to create her video-essays, Biemann conducts fieldwork investigations by observing the conditions of the Mexico-U.S. border and its inhabitants. As such, in Foster’s words, her ethnographic work passes into ‘the expanded field of culture.’³⁸⁵ Falling into the category of site-oriented practices—and like many artists grouped under ‘the documentary turn’—Biemann travels to particular locations, conducts investigations that she later transforms into videos. Someone highly critical of the ethnographic approach might ask: can a Swiss artist educated predominantly in the United States with limited Spanish skills adequately form opinions on the subjects of her research? For me, her background is beside the point: her works complexly and productively analyse in a sustained and self-reflexive manner the geopolitics of the Mexico-U.S. border. And in this case, even Foster’s highly critical view of ethnographic practices ‘rescues’ the methodologies adopted by many artists working under the rubric of the documentary.’ Although Foster does not discuss moving images, he does briefly

³⁸³ Okwui Enwezor, ‘Documenta 11, Documentary, and “the Reality Effect,”’ in *Experiments with Truth*, ed. Mark Nash (Philadelphia: The Fabric Workshop and Museum, 2005), pp. 97-98.

³⁸⁴ Hal Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer,’ in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996), p.181.

³⁸⁵ Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer,’ p.184

consider artists working in the documentary form by examining the photo-essays of Allan Sekula who, as I will go on to argue, shares many of Biemann's concerns. Foster claims that the negative aspects of the 'ethnographic turn'—such as a general lack of questioning on 'sociological authority'—are 'less true' of artists working with 'documentary modes of representation.'³⁸⁶ Of Sekula's work he claims that he is '[...] as reflexive as any new anthropologist about the hubris of [...his] ethnographic project.'³⁸⁷

The 'documentary turn,' as artist and critic Hito Steyerl remarks, can be traced to the early 1990s, when many artists were adopting an ethnographic approach. These practices, according to Steyerl, started to investigate a zone where '[...] video art, documentary film, reportage, essay, and other forms'³⁸⁸ coexist and overlap. This has resulted in a productive body of works that question the authoritative tone commonly associated with the documentary form and its approach to the delivery of 'facts.' Similarly, as curator Mark Nash argues, understanding documentaries as merely pedagogical and transparent vehicles for the transmission of information is both outmoded and problematic. Many artists—including Biemann—have contributed to proposing alternatives.³⁸⁹

Discussing this 'documentary turn' and the increased re-politicisation of contemporary art as exemplified by the video works of the likes of Hito Steyerl, Harun Farocki and Steve McQueen, amongst others, the editors of the volume *The Need to Document* (Vít Havránek, Sabine Schaschl-Cooper and Bettina Steinbrügge) argue that this trend is marked by a self-reflexive attitude that acknowledges the limits of representation.³⁹⁰ Havránek continues:

In these works, art seeks and sets a small depth of focus. That means in a biased manner, with an awareness of the fact that bias and

³⁸⁶ Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' p.185.

³⁸⁷ Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' p.190.

³⁸⁸ Hito Steyerl, 'The Politics of Truth—Documentarism in the Art Field,' in *The Need to Document* (Zurich: JPR Ringier, 2005), p. 53.

³⁸⁹ Mark Nash, 'Experiments With Truth: The Documentary Turn,' in *Experiments with Truth*, ed. Mark Nash (Philadelphia: The Fabric Workshop and Museum, 2005), p. 17.

³⁹⁰ Vít Havránek, Sabine Schaschl-Cooper and Bettina Steinbrügge, 'Foreword,' in *The Need to Document* (Zurich: JPR Ringier, 2005), p. 11.

individualization have, as the other side of the coin, a soft focus on events, objects, and landscapes in the background. Documentarism is characterized by a distrust of the background, of de-subjectivized historical experience, and any kind of grand narration.³⁹¹

Biemann's work not only exemplifies 'the documentary turn' but has also greatly contributed to its early formation and theorisation, as materialised in both her video projects and her numerous writings on her own work, that of other artists and, more generally, the politics of representation. The work I will be analysing for this chapter—*Performing the Border*—is the first among a long line of what she describes as 'video essays.' Her artistic practice is always accompanied by her numerous self-reflexive writings. Biemann has claimed that writing about the subjects she engages with in her video essays has not only helped her to reflect on her own motivations but also facilitates situating her work within an ideal '[...]intellectual and interpretative context [...]'.³⁹² Dovetailing with Havránek description of 'documentarism,' Biemann eloquently defines the work of a video essayist as:

[...] A practice that is at the same time artistic, theoretical and political: ultimately a distinct aesthetic strategy, comfortably, but not exclusively situated in the realm of art. Investigative video practices are not a lonely undertaking, it relies on the knowledge and contacts of many partners on the field, and on the theoretical and aesthetic exchange with colleagues and editors at the moment of montage back in the studio. [...] My work facilitates [...] an open visual and discursive field where the artistic is not separate from the social, but faces the challenge of delivering their complex correlation.³⁹³

For Biemann, the video essay is located somewhere between documentary and video art and thus, purposefully, does not position itself neatly in established

³⁹¹ Vít Havránek, 'The Documentary—An Ontology of Forms in Transforming Countries,' in *The Need to Document* (Zurich: JPR Ringier, 2005), p. 43.

³⁹² Ursula Biemann, 'Going to the Border: An Essayist Project', in *Mission Reports: Artistic Practice in the Field, Video Works 1998-2008*, ed. Ursula Biemann and Jan Erik Lundström (Bristol: Arnolfini, 2008), p.9.

³⁹³ Ursula Biemann, 'Agadez Chronicle: Post-Colonial Politics of Space and Mobility in the Sahara,' in *The Maghreb Connection: Movements of Life Across North Africa*, ed. Ursula Biemann and Brian Holmes (Barcelona: Actar, 2006), p.47.

categories in either art or activism and other political practices.³⁹⁴ As Biemann herself has written in numerous occasions, her work has not always been well received in the confines of the art world and critics have constantly pushed her to make up her mind between 'Marx and Tolstoy.'³⁹⁵ This negative reception can be linked to, in my opinion, a restrictive but longstanding suspicion of the intersection between the documentary and the art field that, as art critics Maria Lind and Steyerl point out in their introduction to *The Green Room: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, is often '[...] accompanied by disagreements about its status as art.'³⁹⁶ A more productive approach is, in my view, one that encourages the ambivalence of the documentary within the art field which, according to Lind and Steyerl:

[...]Has contributed to creating new zones of entanglement between the aesthetic and the ethic, between artifice and authenticity, between fiction and fact, between documentary power and documentary potential, and between art and its social, political, and economic conditions.³⁹⁷

Biemann's expansion of the boundaries of what constitutes art has led to a fruitful body of work that has enabled new ways to think about and represent, *inter alia*, the negative effects of corporate globalisation that often elude normative forms of representation, analysis and communication.³⁹⁸ Discussing *Performing the Border*, Biemann states:

Slow motion, tinting, distortions and intense layering turn the images into discursive elements, rather than a straightforward depiction of (supposed) facts. But, perhaps more importantly, the original sound is deleted to a large extent and replaced by an electronic sound carpet.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁴ Ursula Biemann, 'The Video Essay in the Digital Age,' in *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age*, ed. Ursula Biemann (Zürich and New York: Springer Wien, 2003), p. 8.

³⁹⁵ Ursula Biemann, 'Introduction,' in *Been There and Back to Nowhere: Gender in Transnational Spaces*, ed. Stephan Geene (Berlin and Brooklyn: B_Books, 2000), p.6

³⁹⁶ Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl, 'Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art,' in *The Green Room: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art # 1*, ed. Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl (Berlin and Annandale-on-Hudson: Sternberg Press, 2008), p. 13.

³⁹⁷ Lind and Steyerl, 'Reconsidering the Documentary,' p. 16.

³⁹⁸ Ursula Biemann, 'Introduction,' p.6

³⁹⁹ Ursula Biemann, 'Making the Transnational Intelligible: Performing the Border,' in *Mission Reports: Artistic Practice in the Field, Video Works 1998-2008*, ed. Ursula Biemann and Jan Erik Lundström (Bristol: Arnolfini, 2008), p. 24.

Additionally, as film professor Barbara Mennel argues, Biemann allows her artistic and scholarly work to bleed into each other, successfully creating ‘ [...] a visual language for her theoretical and political concerns.’⁴⁰⁰

Biemann credits her essayistic approach and the use of digital media for creating a separate genre, the video essay. This new genre draws but is distinct from mainstream categories such as the documentary, visual anthropology and video art. She claims that video-essays are ‘ [...] the most suitable genre for an aesthetic project that involves a subjective position and the organization of an amazing diversity of knowledge. The subject need not, and cannot, be presented as a coherent phenomenon explained via linear narration.’⁴⁰¹ ‘Essay’ for Biemann is the adequate term since this genre tends to follow a ‘non-linear’ and ‘non-sequential’ trajectory and draws from various sources and types of knowledge such as interviews, archival material and theoretical texts. Biemann argues that in her work she does not ‘search for reality’; rather, she attempts to generate artificial constructs that can shed a novel light on the subject matters she explores.⁴⁰² For *Performing the Border*, Biemann zooms in on deskilled female labour conditions in the Ciudad Juárez. Her long-standing interest in this geographical area started in 1986, over a decade before the release of her video essay. Her investigation, as she puts it, was ‘self-assigned.’ She first travelled to Ciudad Juárez in 1988 during a time when corporations were more avidly branching out to an international level—a movement that almost exclusively took place from (wealthy) north to (poor) south.⁴⁰³ Her information was obtained from ‘ [...] NGO reports, from labor organizations, and academic texts written by anthropologists, economists, and sociologists.’⁴⁰⁴ Sifting through archives, talking to grassroots organisations, performing extensive fieldwork and engaging with more

⁴⁰⁰Barbara Mennel, ‘The Global Elsewhere: Ursula Biemann’s Multimedia Countergeography,’ in *The Collapse of the Conventional: German Film and Its Politics at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jaimey Fisher and Brad Prager (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 2010), p. 341.

⁴⁰¹ Biemann, ‘Going to the Border,’ p. 15

⁴⁰² Biemann, ‘The Video Essay,’ p.9.

⁴⁰³ Biemann, ‘Going to the Border,’ p. 14.

⁴⁰⁴ Ursula Biemann, ‘Introduction,’ p. 6.

general theoretical and social investigations was, and still is, integral to her artistic practice.⁴⁰⁵

In what follows, I will situate Biemann's work within a feminist context arguing that her work is not only influenced by but contributes to thinking about gender in relation to capitalism and to new forms of labour.

Disassembling and Reassembling Bodies: Gender Matters to Capital

In 1989 the cover text of *Time* magazine read in bold yellow letters 'Women Face the '90s' adding 'In the '80s they tried to have it all. Now they've just plain had it. Is there a future for feminism?'⁴⁰⁶ The following year, the proclamation 'Is feminism dead?' was printed again on the cover.⁴⁰⁷ These two issues of *Time* magazine reflect the attitudes that marked the so-called post-feminist era that, although formed in the crucible of the 1980s, arguably reached its apex during the following decade. The rise of this era was marked by a general depoliticisation of gender inequality, based on the assumption—false, in my view—that pursuing ardent political action had become largely redundant. If we agree with feminist philosopher Judith Butler's statement that popular culture is a site where '[...] power [...] is remade at various junctures within everyday life, constituting our tenuous sense of common sense',⁴⁰⁸ then the combative 'second wave' feminism that characterised the 1970s was substantially dampened in the 1990s.

Other theorists were also critiquing 'second wave' feminism for its Eurocentric position as well as for depending on a white vision of femininity. For example, filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha argued, in her 1989 book *Woman, Native, Other*, that feminist academics were often blinded to issues of women in the 'developing world,'

⁴⁰⁵ Ursula Biemann, 'Introduction,' p. 6.

⁴⁰⁶ Quoted in Amelia Jones, 'Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures, and Embodied Theories of Art,' in *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, ed. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer and Arlene Raven (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994).

⁴⁰⁷ Pamela Aronson, 'Feminists or "Postfeminists"? Young Women's Attitudes toward Feminism and Gender Relations,' in *Gender and Society* 17 (2003): 903-905.

⁴⁰⁸ Judith Butler, 'Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism,' in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, ed. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Verso, 2000), p.14.

claiming that certain versions of feminism sometimes ‘readily merge[...] with that of the *Native* in the context of (neo-colonialist) anthropology.’⁴⁰⁹ Similarly, bell hooks claimed that white theorists who dominate feminist discourse have very little understanding of ‘white supremacy as a racial politic’ and tend to homogenise the category of ‘women’ by merely assuming that ‘women are oppressed’ without factoring in crucial markers such as class, nationality and race.⁴¹⁰

Under these circumstances, academics in search for a fresh perspective on women’s marginalisation issues have turned to the writings of feminists such as Donna J. Haraway and Judith Butler, especially the latter’s books *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993), both on which Biemann extensively draws. These theories, often labelled ‘third wave feminism,’ that became popular in the 1990s, freshly revamped previous feminist critiques by dismantling established notions of sexuality and gender, arguing that gender is socially and culturally constructed rather than an essence. While Butler theoretically reconfigured gender as a performative act—i.e. gender is not an ontological category but is culturally and socio-politically inscribed, enacted and performed on a daily basis—thereby expunging female/male categories of their essentialism, Haraway bases her feminist critique on the figure of the hybrid human-machine cyborg that is likewise free from the straightjacket of normative notions of gender. These feminist theoretical writings are at least partly a response or a product of a postmodernist trend that problematized stable concepts of identity, the binary oppositions of female/male and the notion of any type of autonomous and centred subjectivity.

Butler’s notion of performativity is also an important concept that frames Biemann’s work. The video-essay opens with a view of the maquiladora plants taken from inside a moving car, whilst electronic music is playing in the background (**Plate 3.1**). Shortly thereafter, the viewer is presented with a night-vision aerial shot of the border on what seems to be a military plane (**Plate 3.2**). At the same time, Jottar

⁴⁰⁹ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), p.85.

⁴¹⁰ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), p.4-5.

opens the voiceover by claiming: '[...] The border is always represented as this wound [...]' later adding:

[...]you need the crossing of bodies for the border to become real, otherwise you just have this discursive construction. There is nothing natural about the border. It is a highly constructed place that gets reproduced through the crossing of people [...] It's just an imaginary line.

In other words, the border is a performative space that needs the crossing of people for it to become constituted. In a later article, Biemann similarly claims that the border areas that her work is concerned with (for, as I will expand on later in the chapter, her engagement with borders has gone beyond the Mexico-U.S. one) are given their 'cultural meaning by being transversed and actively produced by the movement of people.'⁴¹¹

Biemann's *Performing the Border*, in both its written and visual materialisations, contribute to and form part of the theoretical and political articulations of 'third wave feminism' that, amongst others, focused on the relationship between capitalism and gender. Crucially for *Geographies of Violence*, as I will go on to discuss, Biemann shores up how the relationship between capitalism and gender is played out in spatial terms, underscoring the fact that space is not gender neutral.

In her essay about the video-essay Biemann makes reference to posthumanism and to the theories of cyborgs posited by Haraway in her seminal 1985 essay 'A Cyborg Manifesto', where she famously defines cyborgs as a ' [...] cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.'⁴¹² Haraway argues that the cyborg is the 'illegitimate offspring' of militarism, patriarchal capitalism and state socialism.⁴¹³ By considering the effects on gender of

⁴¹¹ Ursula Biemann, 'Writing Video-Writing the World: Videographies as Cognitive Medium,' *Transit 4* (2008): 3.

⁴¹² Donna J. Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,' in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), p.149.

⁴¹³ Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto,' p.151.

both race and multinational capitalism, Haraway's writings also related and contributed to discourses linking postcolonialism and feminism. In fact, Haraway's figure of the cyborg is modelled on the notion of mestizo. In her manifesto, she claims that there exists an embarrassing '[...] silence about race among white radical and socialist feminists [which has had] major political consequence[s].' ⁴¹⁴ She also maintains that there is a 'New Industrial Revolution' where women in the 'Third World' are preferred by the electronics industry that, in turn, often holds on to the view that women are better suited for assembling small parts. ⁴¹⁵ For Haraway, 'To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled [and] exploited as a reserve labour force.' ⁴¹⁶ Even though her manifesto was written nearly fifteen years before Biemann's *Performing the Border*, the relationship Haraway provocatively articulates between technology, late capitalism and gender is very much consonant with the socio-political matrix of the borderlands.

Art historian Jennifer González, who has written extensively on Latin American art, argues that historically the image of the cyborg recurs in moments of radical social, political or cultural change where 'the ontological model' of the human body does not adequately dovetail with any existing paradigms, thus eventually engendering images or characters of a human-machine hybrid. For example, the 1920 photomontage *Das schöne Mädchen* (The Beautiful Girl) by Hannah Höch (**Plate 3.3**)—that showed a disassembled female figure intermixed with similarly dismantled car parts—was, according to González, a response to modernisation, to the atrocities committed during World War I and to images of the an emancipated 'New Woman' that were circulating in the mass media in Weimar Germany. ⁴¹⁷

In a similar vein, Haraway's writings might be read as a response to the 'New Industrial Revolution' (referred to above) that witnessed the increasing mechanisation of the female body, especially in 'developing' world sweatshops. Biemann maintains that: 'Only bodies which allow themselves to be exchanged,

⁴¹⁴ Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto,' p. 160.

⁴¹⁵ Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', p. 166.

⁴¹⁶ Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', p. 166.

⁴¹⁷ Jennifer A. González, 'Envisioning the Cyborg Bodies: Notes from Current Research,' in *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, ed. Gill Kirkup, Linda Janes, Kath Woodward and Viona Hovenden (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.61-62.

commodified and recycled will be granted a visa for the transnational production site. At the border, everyone is processed into a transnational subject.⁴¹⁸ Biemann notes that 'the lousy little town' of Juárez is a place in a 'state of emergency' where national sovereignty has conceded all the power to a 'special corporate arrangement', a statement that resonates with both González and Haraway's description of a radical social and economic change.⁴¹⁹

Biemann, in her essay 'Performing the Border', articulates the notion of the female maquiladora worker in very similar terms to those used by Haraway. Biemann argues that '[...] any person can be thought of in terms of dis-assembly and re-assembly,' and claims that the workers are 'post-human' because their bodies become technologised, erasing the differences between the organic and the machine. She maintains that 'These processes fragment [the worker's] body by assigning her body parts various technological functions and turning them into disposable, exchangeable, and marketable components.'⁴²⁰

In her essay 'Performing the Border' Biemann also makes reference to the writings of philosopher Rosi Braidotti and underlines her approach of dismantling the stability of the concepts of body, gender, subjectivity and identity.⁴²¹ Braidotti claims that 'the body is not an essence' adding that 'the embodied subject is a term in a process of intersecting forces (affects), spatiotemporal variables that are characterized by their mobility, changeability, and transitory nature[...]' ⁴²² Additionally, her notion of 'disposable bodies' aptly characterises the female labourer in Juárez under the working conditions of the maquiladora industry. For Braidotti, 'disposable bodies' are '[...] racialized or marked off by age, gender, sexuality, and income, reduced to marginality, come to be inscribed with a particular violence in this regime of power. They experience dispossession of their embodied and embedded

⁴¹⁸ Biemann, 'Making the Transnational Intelligible,' p. 20.

⁴¹⁹ Biemann, 'Performing the Border,' p. 84-85.

⁴²⁰ Biemann, 'Performing the Border,' p.102.

⁴²¹ Biemann, 'Performing the Border,' p.113.

⁴²² Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 247.

selves[...]⁴²³ In her recent book *Transpositions* Braidotti, not unlike Haraway, makes an explicit link between the cyborg—human-machine hybrids— and the maquiladora female worker, the anonymous unskilled and underpaid woman that can be conceived as a mere extension of the machinery installed in the offshore sweatshops.⁴²⁴

In line with Braidotti—and as art critic Angela Dimitrikaki has noted—Biemann's work departs from the traditional feminist agenda: instead of opposing patriarchal domination she shifts the focus to the detrimental effects of neoliberalism on women.⁴²⁵ In the voiceover of the video-essay Biemann states that 'gender matters to capital,' an observation that has been extensively unpacked by a number of other academics. Sociologist Saskia Sassen has written profusely on the effects of neoliberalism and corporate offshore production on the female workforce, claiming that there is a 'systemic relation between globalization and feminization of wage labour.'⁴²⁶ She argues that the movement of manufacturing and assembly jobs overseas, under the competitive pressure to produce at lower costs for the international market, has led to a rise in demand for female proletariat in 'developing' countries that, they perceive, is cheaper and less likely to unionise.⁴²⁷ Similarly, feminist writer Zillah Eisenstein holds that global capital is flourishing '[...] because of a racial-patriarchal transnational sexual division of labor,' and that its success has been built on the backs of unskilled female labour.⁴²⁸ Raqs Media Collective—sophisticated group of artists and critics founded in Delhi in 1991—have also been interested in how 'gender matters to capital' writing, in a volume edited by Biemann, that '[...] the quintessential twenty-first century worker is the single migrant woman who lives between the margins of shrinking or non-existent welfare benefits [...] and

⁴²³ Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 6.

⁴²⁴ Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2006), p. 30.

⁴²⁵ Angela Dimitrakaki, 'Materialist Feminism for the Twenty-First Century: The Video Essays of Ursula Biemann', in *Mission Reports: Artistic Practice in the Field, Video Works 1998-2008*, ed. Ursula Biemann and Jan Erik Lundström (Bristol: Arnolfini, 2008), p.116-122.

⁴²⁶ Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* (New York: New Press, 1998), p.111.

⁴²⁷ Saskia Sassen, 'Women's Burden: Counter-Geographies of Globalization and the Feminization of Survival,' in *Journal of International Affairs* 53 (2000): 509

⁴²⁸ Zillah Eisenstein, *Global Obscenities: Patriarchy, Capitalism and the Lure of Cyberfantasy* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998), p.134.

always uncertain employment.⁴²⁹ They extensively investigate this phenomenon in their multi-video work *A/S/L: Age/Sex/Location* (2003) in which they focused on a call centre in India whose workers were being trained to answer the phone in an American Midwestern accent.⁴³⁰

This 'uncertain employment' and general precariousness of labour also characterises the maquila worker. Maquiladoras, as I mentioned, are sites for outsourced production predominantly in the high technology industry, but also in other sectors such as the automobile and garment industries.⁴³¹ They started to proliferate in the mid-1960s, well before NAFTA, and were endorsed by the Mexican government as a way to promote economic expansion through industrialisation in the borderlands. In 1965 the Border Industrial Programme (BIP) was set up to mimic offshore production practices that American manufacturers were already implementing elsewhere, most especially in the Far East.⁴³² As Biemann explained '[...] labor-intensive processes were located in Mexico, capital-intensive ones in the U.S.'⁴³³ In her essay 'Free Zone Plan,' Biemann writes that the rise of the maquiladora industry was a response to the closure of the Bracero Program (1942-1964)—a bi-national guest worker agreement between Mexico and the U.S. that allowed Mexican labourers to work in the north side of the border for a limited period of time—which generated mass unemployment in the Mexican border region when migrants were forced to return.⁴³⁴ In the decades that followed the size of maquiladoras escalated, particularly after 1982, when the Mexican peso was devalued substantially and the wages on the Mexican side, when measured in dollars, were even lower in contrast to

⁴²⁹ Raqs Media Collective, 'A/S/L: Age/Sex/Location,' in *Geography and the Politics of Mobility*, ed. Ursula Biemann (Vienna: Generali Foundation: 2003), p. 85.

Elena Bernardini, 'Raqs Media Collective: Nomadism in Art Practice,' in *Global and Local Art Histories*, ed. Celina Jeffery and Gregory Minissale (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), p. 245.

⁴³⁰ Pamela M. Lee, *Forgetting the Art World* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2012), p.177.

⁴³¹ Alejandro Lugo, *Fragmented Lives, Assembled Parts: Culture, Capitalism and Conquest at the Mexico-U.S. Border* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), pp. 2-6.

⁴³² Lawrence A. Herzog, 'Global Tijuana: The Seven Ecologies of the Border,' in *Postborder City: Cultural Spaces of Baja California*, ed. Michael Dear and Gustavo Leclerc (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), p. 122-23.

Offshore production refers to the practice of relocating a company's manufacturing processes or services overseas in order to cut costs.

⁴³³ Ursula Biemann, 'Free Zone Plan,' p. 70.

⁴³⁴ Ursula Biemann, 'Free Zone Plan,' pp. 70-71.

those in the United States.⁴³⁵ By 1999, when Biemann released *Performing the Border*, the working force of the maquiladoras had nearly doubled in size.⁴³⁶

Although the BIP intended to solve predominantly male unemployment in the region, most maquiladoras were staffed with young women, whose nimble hands were perceived to be more suited to the tedious process of assembling small parts, a subject to which I will return.⁴³⁷ Biemann investigates, from a feminist perspective, this environment in which the working force is mostly female. This has resulted in, amongst others, the proliferation of numerous entertainment (often sexualised) establishments that cater to an overwhelmingly female population. In a voiceover, Biemann explains:

The border is a highly gendered region. Economic power relations along the line of gender differences are spelled out in sexual terms. Relationship patterns are being re-mapped quite drastically. There is a certain reversal of income pattern that empowers women. In the dance halls, the shift of buying power to young women is obvious. Entertainment mainly caters to female customer, i.e. shows of male strippers where women cheer and rate their sex appeal. Even in the lyrics of the music we often find explicit reference to satisfying female sexual desires.

But in spite of the overwhelmingly female population of Ciudad Juárez and other Mexican industrial border cities, and notwithstanding the entertainment venues tailored to suit their desires and tastes, the gender imbalances created by the heavyweights of corporate offshore production have resulted in poor working and living conditions. In fact, male managers usually control most of the female labour. Sociologist Leslie Salzinger, who has written extensively on gender and the maquiladora industry, points out that often 'Flirtation and sexual competition become the currency through which shop-floor power relations are struggled over and fixed.

⁴³⁵ Robert A. Pastor, 'Sliding Toward Economic Integration: The U.S. Perspective,' in *Limits to Friendship: The United States and Mexico*, ed. Robert A. Pastor and Jorge G. Castañeda (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), p. 209

⁴³⁶ Joe Bandy, 'Bordering the Future: Resisting Neoliberalism in the Borderlands,' in *Critical Sociology* 26 (2000): 237.

⁴³⁷ Biemann, 'Free Zone Plan,' p. 70-71.

Women are addressed, and respond, as desirable objects [...]’⁴³⁸ Through her complex work, Biemann teases out the complexities of the contradiction between, on the one hand, the empowered female labour force that allows women to enjoy sexual freedom and relative economic independence and, on the other, working conditions that fix them into an economy of violence and subjugation.

Political scientists Jane H. Bayes and Rita Mae Kelly maintain that the majority of maquiladora employees work for very low wages and are subject to unsafe working conditions, sexual harassment and pregnancy testing, and move against a backdrop where harsh employment contracts make unionising nearly impossible.⁴³⁹ Biemann interviews a former maquiladora worker who was fired because she put forward, together with a group of her co-workers, a proposal to build a cafeteria in her plant. She explains that the maquiladoras maintain a ‘black list’ where any attempt to form any sort of movement is noted and shared amongst the main companies in the region. It is difficult, she claims, to get any sort of job if you are already flagged in the black list. In addition, maquila workers’ living conditions are also deplorable: many have no access to electricity, running water and live in slums located in arid terrain.⁴⁴⁰ A subtitle in the video essay reads ‘For many living in the city still means a rural lifestyle’ and is followed by numerous scenes showing the slum conditions of Juárez **(Plate 3.4)**. The houses that Biemann shows us seem badly if not dangerously built—sometimes surrounded by debris such as discarded wooden crates—and routes that lead up to them are mere dirt roads. There is one scene, where a young woman is shown outside of her makeshift home laboriously washing clothes in a large metal container, very likely due to the lack of both electricity and running water **(Plate 3.5)**.

In the following section, I will look specifically at Biemann’s rendering of labour in *Performing the Border*, contextualising her work within other, sometimes older, representations of this theme. I will argue that Biemann offers an innovative

⁴³⁸ Leslie Salzinger, *Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico’s Global Factories* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2003), p.30.

⁴³⁹ Jane H. Bayes and Rita Mae Kelly, ‘Political Spaces, Gender, and NAFTA,’ in *Gender, Globalization and Democratization*, ed. Rita Mae Kelly, Jane H. Bayes, Mary Hawkesworth and Bridgitte Young (Lanham, Boulder, New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), p. 165.

⁴⁴⁰ Bayes and Kelly, ‘Political Spaces,’ p. 165.

way of portraying low-skilled labour that, in the face of today's economic imbalances, has not lost any of its relevance.

Representational Bans: Workers Leaving the Factory

Throughout the video-essay, Biemann carefully weaves the strenuous type of labour performed in the maquilas to issues of gender. According to international relations professor Marianne H. Marchand, who has written widely on the feminisation of labour in Mexico, women in this context are often conceptualised as '[...] being physically better suited for repetitive and often tedious tasks, as being more submissive and hence less likely to join a labour union than men[...]'⁴⁴¹ For Salzinger, the 'malleable, "trainable," undemanding' being that embodies the ideal maquiladora worker is not found but rather *made* by capital.⁴⁴² She continues:

In contemporary transnational managerial frameworks, "femininity" has become closely linked to productivity[...] The feminine image of the ideal worker framed maquila industry development from the outside [...] By the early nineties, the image of the Young Woman Worker was as present as ever in the maquila industry.⁴⁴³

The service sector predominates nowadays in the world economy and new forms of labour have been created—'immaterial labour'—in activities where consumers are often targeted not with specific services but rather with experiences and lifestyles. But it is important not to lose sight of those workers who, still chained to the repetitive tasks performed in assembly lines, generate the material objects without which the service economy could not thrive.⁴⁴⁴ A high-tech lifestyle, for

⁴⁴¹ Marianne H. Marchand, 'Engendering Globalization in an Era of Transnational Capital: New Cross-Border Alliances and Strategies of Resistance in a post-NAFTA Mexico,' in *Feminist Post-Development Thought: Rethinking modernity, Postcolonialism & Representation*, ed. Kriemild Saunders (London and New York: Zed Books, 2002), p. 111.

⁴⁴² Salzinger, *Genders in Production*, p.2.

⁴⁴³ Salzinger, *Genders in Production*, pp.10-11.

⁴⁴⁴ This subject was extensively analyzed in a conference at Tate Britain in London, *Untitled (Labour): Contemporary Art & Immaterial Production* organized by T.J. Demos, Lauren Rotenberg and Nora Razian on March 17th, 2012.

example, obviously requires high-tech products. As Benjamin Buchloh has succinctly pointed out:

[...] in a self-declared and post-industrial and post-working class society, where large segments of labor are in fact concealed from common view since they are exported to the geo-political 'margins' [...] the experience of production and the conditions of industrial labor have been banned from a massive representational prohibition from modernist visual culture.⁴⁴⁵

Performing the Border is centred on how 'gender matters to capital,' specifically in terms of the deskilled assembly line labour of Ciudad Juárez. Footage of women working in the maquiladoras and interviews in which women share their experiences of working these multinational corporations constitutes the backbone of Biemann's project. My aim here is to examine how *Performing the Border* contravenes in this modernist visual ban that Buchloh refers to. I will investigate how her project represents the lives of women working at the maquiladoras. As Sekula pointed out, and as I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, finding strategies of effectively representing labour and unpacking the mechanisms that enable capital to create functional conditions for the use of deskilled wage workers—even though these workers struggle for mere subsistence in 'less than human conditions—is critical to any current study of contemporary Mexico-U.S. borderlands. Indeed, since the video-essay's release in 1999 maquiladoras are no less conspicuous in the region than they were over a decade ago, when Biemann was conducting her investigation.

In terms of the representation of deskilled labour, Allan Sekula's writings and photographic works offer an important precedent. According to art critic Hilde Van Gelder and cultural studies professor Jan Baetens, Sekula's works 'rediscovers and reinvents the theme of labor' to an extent that had not been seen since the epoch of socialist realism.⁴⁴⁶ Sekula has claimed that his:

⁴⁴⁵ Benjamin Buchloh, 'Allan Sekula: Photography Between Discourse and Document,' in *Fish Story: Allan Sekula* (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2002), p. 191.

⁴⁴⁶ Hilde Van Gelder and Jan Baetens, 'Introduction: A Note on Critical Realism Today,' in *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art: Around Allan Sekula's Photography*, ed. Jan Baetens and Hilde Van Gelder (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2006), p. 9.

[...]work with photographs revolves around relationships between wage-labor and ideology [...] I have tended to construct narratives around crisis situations; around unemployment and work-place struggles, situations in which ideology fails to provide a “rational” and consoling interpretation of the world, unless one has already learned to expect the worst[...]⁴⁴⁷

Like Biemann, he also writes and theorises about the subjects of his artistic practice. Although his work consists mostly of photography as opposed to Biemann’s video—although recently he has made more videos including *Tsukiji* in 2000 that documents labourers at a fish market in Tokyo—it often functions, in his words, as a ‘disassembled movie,’ consisting of sequential photographs that are accompanied, enriched and aided by his writings, including narratives of the interviews he conducts.⁴⁴⁸ For instance, he created a photonovel in 1974 entitled *This Ain’t China* that consists of long sequences of photographs together with, as he put it, “‘novelistic’ texts and taped interviews’ **(Plate 3.6)**, representing the harsh working conditions of a restaurant kitchen in San Diego.⁴⁴⁹ The project has been displayed as a standard exhibition layout, as a book and as a slide show. Sekula writes that his aim was to show how ‘[...] repetitive alienated work colonizes the unconscious, particularly work in crowded, greasy “backstage kitchens.”’⁴⁵⁰ Similarly, Sekula’s *Untitled Slide Sequence* of 1972 shows multiple transparencies projected at thirteen-second intervals showing workers walking up the stairs, streaming to leave an aerospace factory in California **(Plate 3.7)**. The projection displays workers moving towards and past the camera, creating a narrative sequence that is situated somewhere between photography and film.⁴⁵¹ Discussing Sekula’s work, Buchloh maintains that this work attempts to ‘[...] overcome the ban on the representation of labor imposed by an aesthetic of modernist restriction.’⁴⁵²

⁴⁴⁷ Sekula, ‘Dismantling Modernism,’ p. 70.

⁴⁴⁸ Allan Sekula, ‘Allan Sekula and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh: Conversation,’ in *Allan Sekula: Performance under Working Conditions*, ed. Sabine Breitwieser (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2003), p. 24.

⁴⁴⁹ Sekula, ‘Dismantling Modernism,’ p.71.

⁴⁵⁰ Sekula, ‘Dismantling Modernism,’ p.71.

⁴⁵¹ Christine Ross, *The Past is the Present, It’s the Future Too: The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art* (New York and London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), p. 275.

⁴⁵² Buchloh, ‘Allan Sekula,’ p.194.

Other artists, whose work is often considered under the broad aegis of the 'documentary turn', have also attempted to represent conditions of deskilled labour. One example is London born artist and filmmaker Steven McQueen's *Western Deep* (2002), commissioned for Documenta XI. In this video, he explores the grim working conditions of miners in the deepest gold mine in the world, near Johannesburg.⁴⁵³ T.J. Demos writes extensively on this video in *The Migrant Image*, where he comments on a scene where miners are shown jumping up and down, in a seemingly uniform fashion, performing an exercise monitored by men in white laboratory coats (**Plate 3.8**). Conforming to a 'standardized temporality,' as Demos puts it this scene unravels some of the social ramifications of scientific management of labour in the neocolonial post-apartheid context.⁴⁵⁴ Biemann's maquila workers, like Steve McQueen's miners, also conforms to this standardised temporality that Demos identifies.

One of Biemann's aims in *Performing the Border* was to '[...] figure out how to transpose old labor representations into a contemporary aesthetic and how to integrate theoretical discourse that includes gender theories, technology critique, and performativity.'⁴⁵⁵ In this video-essay, Biemann shows three very similar interspersed scenes that consist of archival footage of women leaving the maquila (**Plate 3.9**). The first is a black and white photograph from 1988 that consists mainly of women—although one man is seen amongst the almost never-ending flow of female workers—streaming from the factory gates. Two almost identical scenes (but unlike the first one, undated) are then inserted. The last of these three ends the video-essay. By 'transpos[ing] old labor representations into a contemporary aesthetic' she is deliberately inserting her project into a historical account of deskilled labour and its representation. To understand this historical transposition it is worth examining the shifts in labour organisation and manufacturing processes that took place in the transition from Fordist to the Post-Fordist periods.

⁴⁵³ For more information and analysis of this work see T.J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), p.33.

⁴⁵⁴ Demos, *The Migrant Image*, pp.43-45.

⁴⁵⁵ Biemann, 'Making the Transnational Intelligible,' p. 24.

Broadly, Fordism was a term that reflected the mass production methods and management rules applied by carmaker Henry Ford during the 1920s and 1930s.⁴⁵⁶ As geographer Ash Amin—editor of the volume *Post-Fordism: A Reader*—explains, there are multiple, sometimes competing definitions and theoretical frameworks of Post-Fordism.⁴⁵⁷ Amin maintains that ‘[...] capitalist development is better seen as permanently crisis-ridden and contradictory [...]’⁴⁵⁸ For this chapter, however, I am specifically interested in Post-Fordism as it relates to an assembly line characterised, *inter alia*, by the feminisation and flexibility of labour, which cultural theorist Stuart Hall has aptly and succinctly captured in the following description:

A shift of the new “information technologies”; more flexible, decentralised forms of labour process and work organisation; decline of the old manufacturing base [...] the hiving off or contracting out of functions and services [...] a decline in the proportion of the skilled, male, manual working class, [...] the “feminization” of the work force; an economy dominated by multinationals, with [...] their greater autonomy from nation state control; and the “globalisation” of the new financial markets, linked by the communications revolution. [...] Post-Fordism is also associated with broader social and cultural changes. For example, greater fragmentation and pluralism, the weakening of older collective solidarities and block identities and the emergence of new identities associated with greater work flexibility, the maximisation of individual choices through personal consumption.⁴⁵⁹

Hall’s early description—written in 1988 the same year that Biemann’s appropriated footage showcasing women leaving the factory was shot—fits well with the type of labour performed in the maquilas and with Biemann’s visual rendering of it. In a voiceover in her video-essay, Biemann claims: ‘Life on the border teaches you to cope with contradictions [...] because *flexibility* is a matter of survival when you are among the extras on the set of corporate culture’ (my emphasis). Post-Fordism is often discussed in terms of the flexibility of labour to adapt to alternative methods and

⁴⁵⁶ Ash Amin, ‘Post-Fordism: Models, Fantasies and Phantoms of Transition,’ in *Post-Fordism: A Reader*, ed. Ash Amin (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), p.9.

⁴⁵⁷ Amin, ‘Post-Fordism,’ p.5.

⁴⁵⁸ Amin, ‘Postfordism,’ p. 11.

⁴⁵⁹ Stuart Hall, ‘Brave New World,’ *Marxism Today* (1988): 24.

processes of production; of its malleability to follow changing patterns of consumption; and of the ease to hire and fire workers and to shift them quickly from one repetitive task to another. In other words, a flexible firm can reorganise its labour force swiftly. As sociologist Harriet Bradley and employment relations professor Geraldine Healy discuss, flexibility and the feminisation of labour are more often than not connected: women are *perceived* to be more likely to shy away from unionising; more willing to undertake part-time or so called 'non-standard employment'; and readier to accept changes to working conditions and pay.⁴⁶⁰ Geographer David Harvey recognised this trend that, although started in the 1970s continues to rise rapidly, and is marked by 'enhanced powers of flexibility and mobility' of the labour force, often accompanied with displacement of manufactured jobs from advanced capitalist economies to 'newly industrialising countries.'⁴⁶¹

One of the ways in which Biemann visually articulates the flexibility of labour patterns is by making use of the also flexible possibilities of digital video. Curator Christiane Paul observes that '[...] by means of digital technologies, disparate visual elements can be seamlessly blended with a focus on a "new," simulated form of reality[...].'⁴⁶² Indeed, the flexibility of the video-essay allows Biemann to capture the complexities of Post-Fordist labour via a polymorphous collection of footages, images and sounds. Biemann relates the qualities of the essay to the new forms of digital media maintaining that the:

[...] New image and editing technologies have made it easy to stack an almost unlimited number of audio and video tracks one on top of another, with multiple images, titles, running texts and a complex mix competing for the attention of the audience. Stuff it! Distil it! Stratify and compress it! Seem to be the mottos of the digital essayists.⁴⁶³

⁴⁶⁰ Harriet Bradley and Geraldine Healy, *Ethnicity and Gender at Work: Inequalities, Careers and Employment Relations* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 9-10.

⁴⁶¹ David Harvey, 'Flexible Accumulation through Urbanization: Reflections on 'Post-modernism' in the American City,' in *Post-Fordism: A Reader*, ed. Ash Amin (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), p.352.

⁴⁶² Christiane Paul, 'Expanding Cinema: The Moving Image in Digital Art,' in *Film and Video Art*, ed. Stuart Corner (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), p. 134.

⁴⁶³ Biemann, 'The Video Essay,' p. 9.

Biemann's concept of geography—that she defines as 'a visual form of spatializing territorial and human relations'⁴⁶⁴—also benefits from the possibilities offered by digital video technology. She adds that her work should be understood as '[...] a spatialization of the dynamic social and economic relations connecting local systems to the transnational.'⁴⁶⁵ Further, Biemann extends Butler's notion of 'performing gender'—the notion that gender is constituted through various reiterative practices—to 'performing the border.' She states in her essay 'Performing Borders' that:

The idea that borders are socially formed and performed is not only inspiring, it truly enhances the agency of artists, writers and video makers since it highlights their involvement in the symbolic production as a performative act of 'doing border,' if we wish to adapt Judith Butler's notion of 'doing gender' to this geographic act.⁴⁶⁶

In a feminist context, eminent geographer Doreen Massey argued in the mid 1990s that 'the spatial' can be more accurately thought of '[...] in terms of the ever-shifting geometry of social/power relations, and it forces into view the real multiplicities of space-time,'⁴⁶⁷ also arguing that gender has had a deep role to play in these relations. Gender division of labour, continues Massey, is being played out in spatial terms, determined by the way in which corporations and industries treat men and women differently, often assigning different types of jobs and pay grades.⁴⁶⁸ Visual artist Angela Melitopoulos and philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato aver that with video montage:

[...]geography is not assessed through the representation of filmed objects but via narrative structures and montage strategies that emerge through affects evoked by image flows [...] Video technology's main asset is the

⁴⁶⁴ Biemann, 'Writing Video,' p. 1

⁴⁶⁵ Biemann, 'Writing Video,' p. 2.

⁴⁶⁶ Ursula Biemann, 'Performing Borders: The Transnational Video,' in *Stuff It: The Video Essay in the Digital Age*, ed. Ursula Biemann (Zürich and New York: Springer Wien, 2003), p.89.

⁴⁶⁷ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1994), p.4.

⁴⁶⁸ Massey, *Space*, pp. 201-204.

possibility to shape motion contained in thought and to make it accessible as a topology of time.⁴⁶⁹

As I will continue to argue, consonant with both Melitopoulos and Lazzarato's notion of the video montage, Biemann articulates—via a complex flow of images, rhythms and narratives—both the shape and motion of capitalism that, as I mentioned, is characterised by the stillness of low-skilled labour and the hypermobility of capital. In addition if, as Massey claims, gender divisions are often 'played out in spatial terms', then the representations of geography, space and labour are intimately connected. Unhinged from normative renderings, the representational dominance of cartography throughout Biemann's video-essay is reinforced by the numerous scenes showing different kinds of maps, including some produced via digital animation and others in black and white, in an 'X-ray aesthetic' (**Plates 3.10, 3.11 and 3.12**). For Biemann 'Maps are no mere renderings of existing terrain, they are performative,'⁴⁷⁰ expand as she highlights in the context of another video-essay.

Views such as Melitopoulos and Lazzarato's were made possible by the writings of thinkers such as de Certeau who, as I mentioned in the introduction, were dismantling established notions of space during the 1980s. Biemann's understanding of geography and space can be linked to a long-standing investigation of space that follows the trajectory of site-oriented practices that Kwon and Meyer theorise. Her works, unlike the practices that Kwon and Meyer discuss, treat space virtually, superimposing and weaving planes of 'image flows,' 'narrative structures' and 'actual' locations to create a sophisticated topology. Amongst others, Biemann's expanded notion of 'site' includes the way in which the urban fabric is shaped to suit the needs of capital. Space locks women into incarcerating and even dangerous spaces and, through a complex choreography of images and sounds, Biemann reveals how space is complicit with the violence of the region.

⁴⁶⁹ Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato, 'Timescapes/ B-Zone,' in *Political Typographies: Visual Essays on the Margins of Europe* (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2007), p.73.

⁴⁷⁰ Biemann, 'Agadez Chronicle,' p.53.

Biemann analyses the shifts in labour patterns by contextualising her work against earlier representations of labour. Images of people departing their workplace have had a long history, as extensively analysed by artist Harun Farocki's well-known video *Workers Leaving the Factory*, created in 1995 to coincide with the centenary of Lumière's documentary film of the same name, considered by some as the first motion picture ever made.⁴⁷¹ Four years later, in 1999, Biemann's video-essay also shows numerous scenes of maquila workers streaming outside the gates of a factory, tinted in black and white, thus giving them an ageing aesthetic. Farocki's work contains excerpts of eleven movies representing the eleven decades of the history of cinema, and starts with the iconic *Leaving the Lumière Factory* that depicts a stream of predominantly women outside his factory premises in Lyon **(Plate 3.13)**. This scene is shown several times throughout Farocki's video and, underlining its historic importance, the female voiceover can be heard throughout the work reciting in a flat, almost monotone voice, '*Workers Leaving the Factory*, that was the title of the first film ever made. It was the first time that pictures of people in motion could be seen' (even though, of course, this is an illusion). Farocki's film includes segments of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* of 1926, displaying workers changing shifts, and of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Il Deserto Rosso* of 1964, that likewise shows bodies in movement.

But workers are being filmed leaving the factory, not working *inside* them. In other words, the film records what happens *after* labour time. Thus, we hear in the background of Farocki's film a female voice stating, 'whenever possible films have moved swiftly *away* from factories.'⁴⁷² (my emphasis) consonant with Buchloh's aforementioned claim. The female voice continues:

In one hundred years of film there have probably been more prison gates than factory gates [...] Whenever possible film has moved hastily away from factories. Factories have not attracted film, rather they have repelled

⁴⁷¹ David Montero, *Thinking Images: The Essay Film as a Dialogic Form in European Cinema* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012), p.73.

⁴⁷² Bert Rebhandl, 'Enemy at the Gate: Harun Farocki's Work on the Industrial Disputes of Film History,' in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmann and Kodwo Eshun (London: Koenig Books, 2009), pp. 123-127.

it. If we line up one hundred scenes of people leaving factories, we can imagine that the same shot had been taken over and over [...]

Why have factories, as the woman in Farocki's film declares, repelled film? Why, as Buchloh maintains, has there been a virtual ban on the representation of deskilled labour?' Art and aesthetics professor John Roberts argues that since labourers in a factory are generally not allowed to talk while they work '[...] labour can only be *seen* and not represented [...]' As such, film soon surrenders itself to the inertial drag of repetitive labour [...] The factory is the place where representation cannot freely move.'⁴⁷³ Indeed, the repetitive and monotonous labour of factory workers does not easily lend itself to the film's desire for narrative and movement. Especially the activities of maquila workers—where hands endlessly assemble minute electronic parts—actively resist the camera's natural appetite for activity, movement and aesthetic stimulation. But I will argue that Biemann does find alternative ways of representing maquila female labour. She constantly reinforces the minuteness of the components built by maquila workers, and the small movements needed to create them, by repeatedly zooming in on what appear to be electronic microchips, the serial numbers barely discernible in their labyrinthine-like structure **(Plate 3.14)**. The almost microscopic structures resemble the maps she shows throughout the video-essay, containing their own passageways, nodes and connection points.

Writing about *Performing the Border*, Biemann states that visual representation of this topic is difficult partly because the spaces she explores in this project are:

[...]widely inaccessible; entry is restricted and under official, corporate or private control. The industrial parks are gated, borders are monitored, assembly plants are off-limits, clubs and bars are full of pimps and vigilant guards; this would involve image-making on prohibited terrain. Yet, refraining from making a film about assembly plants simply because they won't allow you on the factory floor with a camera cannot be the solution. Despite the strict regime of corporations, we have to find ways of

⁴⁷³ John Roberts, 'The Missing Factory,' *Mute* (2012), July 11th 2002. Date accessed: 7th of July 2013. <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/missing-factory>

representing the situation—by finding information [...] and constructing a complex whole.⁴⁷⁴

So the inside of the factory is not only intrinsically unappealing to camera but there is also an additional explanation for its lack of representation which is, generally, corporations need for secrecy both to protect information about their products and processes and, more sinisterly, to hide the working conditions of their labourers. This secrecy is made evident in the video-essay when Biemann tries to film workers going into a factory and is being stopped by a security guard waving vehemently towards the camera (**Plate 3.15**). As such, it seems that she was unable to record her own footage of women working inside the maquilas and instead, resorted to inserting official corporate advertisements that, not unexpectedly, flaunt efficiency, cleanliness—most of the workers are shown wearing scrubs and protective goggles—and optimal working conditions (**Plate 3.16**). But critically, Biemann deliberately chose *not* to insert this footage seamlessly in her video essay. Instead, to underline that these scenes are representations of other representations, the edge of the television monitor can often be seen framing them.

At other points in the video-essay, footage of women working in maquilas is shown with a small label 'RCA'—the trademark still in use today of a former electronics company—on the top left corner, again highlighting the film's 'secondary framing' (**Plate 3.17**). Often the screen flickers informing us that the visual source is analogue rather than digital. What the female workers are producing is never understood or fully explained. Instead, we are just shown a series of the workers' small movements while operating complex machinery that entangles and restrains their bodies within a series of cables and electronic components. Biemann's attention to framing, such as repeatedly showing TV monitors, crucially reveals how her project is centred on the politics of representation—and the representation of politics. Biemann explains:

⁴⁷⁴ Biemann, 'Making the Transnational Intelligible,' p. 24.

My simultaneous engagement with the geopolitical and social transformations being induced by globalization, and the form in which these could be addressed in the expanded aesthetic field, are conceptually related. These two ongoing processes are connected and hinge, in my work, on the concept of the border [...] The border project encapsulates my ongoing interest in conducting territorial research on the geopolitics of human displacement from a gendered perspective [...] The border is a synthetic area, and this has been made perceptible through the manipulation and layering of images and an electronic soundscape.⁴⁷⁵

Indeed, Biemann's concern with the politics of representation is patent throughout the video-essay. She shows the viewer countless close-up images of television sets, sometimes allowing the sound they emit to be heard—for example, there are scenes displaying TV advertisements of women dancing to promote the Mexican beer Corona—and at others the sound becoming only a part of the background while a given interview is taking place (**Plates 3.18, 3.19 and 3.20**). An animation entitled '*Zona Minada*' (mined zone) shows the borderlands flanked by a Mexican and an American flag with the subtitle '*mas de mil indocumentados mexicanos cruzan esta zona diariamente*' (more than a thousand undocumented Mexicans cross this zone every day), which seems to be created with the use of digital technology (**Plate 3.21**). Some aerial shots of the border are also digitally constructed. Numerous maps of the Mexico-U.S. borderlands are presented, complemented by digitally animated birds-eye view of the area (**Plates 3.10, 3.11 and 3.12**). There is a restatement of the opening image, that consists of the back of a woman driving and the frontal window screen of the car (**Plate 3.22**). Television sets show what appears to be movies of men on horseback seen from the viewpoint of another man driving his car, in both a tinted yellow and a kind of X-ray 'aesthetic' (**Plates 3.23 and 3.24**). In each of these shots she films the TV itself, displaying either its contours only or the set in its entirety, rather than integrating the footage into the video essay.

Cinema expert Anne Friedman suggests that frames—that, according to her, can be thought of as 'ontological cuts' that distinguish what is inside of the frame's confines from what exists outside—have had a long history in the narrative of visual

⁴⁷⁵ Biemann, 'Going to the Border,' pp. 13-14.

representation starting in the 15th century with Leon Battista Alberti's writings on perspective.⁴⁷⁶ In Biemann's video-essay, the windshields—Paul Virilio describe them as 'cinema in the strict sense'—⁴⁷⁷and the video monitors function as self-reflexive frames, dovetailing with her own assertion that:

Essayist practice is highly self-reflexive in that it constantly reconsiders the act of image-making and the desire to produce meaning. It is consciously engaged in the activity of representation itself [...] Essayist work doesn't aim primarily at documenting realities but at organizing complexities.⁴⁷⁸

The possibilities opened by the advent of digital technology in the 1990s, Friedman holds, have led to an increase in 'secondary framing', or what she terms 'windowed screens,' that challenge simple fixed perspective and, in turn, allows for a self-reflexive approach, one that is aware of video's own artifice.⁴⁷⁹ Friedman continues: 'The frame becomes the threshold—the liminal site—of tensions between the immobility of a spectator/viewer/user and the mobility of images seen through the mediated "windows" of film, television and computer screens.'⁴⁸⁰ More specifically to *Performing the Border*, Demos, who has written about Biemann's work, maintains that the film essay 'makes apparent the condition of film as film.'⁴⁸¹ Discussing Biemann's later work, *Sahara Chronicles* (2006-2007), Demos continues: 'Biemann's film redefines documentary's ambition as not only the *representation* but the *constitution* of reality, inspiring belief in the world of its own construction.'⁴⁸² Discussing McQueen's work, Demos asserts that animation often helps to foreground a 'visual field beyond the transparent documentary.'⁴⁸³ Biemann's use of animation, her insertion of maps, the way she tints and changes the relevant footage, the interviews, her voiceover and writings, are all components that contribute to Biemann's project of

⁴⁷⁶ Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2006), p.5.

⁴⁷⁷ Quoted in Karen Beckman, *Crash: Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 5.

⁴⁷⁸ Biemann, 'The Video Essay,' p.10.

⁴⁷⁹ Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, pp.192-193.

⁴⁸⁰ Friedberg, *The Virtual Window*, p.6.

⁴⁸¹ Demos, *The Migrant Image*, p. 211.

⁴⁸² Demos, *The Migrant Image*, p. 212.

⁴⁸³ Demos, *The Migrant Image*, p.30.

underlining the traps of representation under the conditions of global capitalism that, more often than not, navigate unquestioned in today's mass media.

Choreographing the Movements of Corporate Globalisation: Bodily and Vehicular Im(mobilities)

Importantly, Biemann visually represents the seeming contradiction between the mobility of capital and the geographical stasis of some sections of the deskilled labour force. In this section I will also be looking specifically at what sociologists have called the 'mobility turn.' According to sociologist John Urry, author of *Mobilities* (2007), theorists and academics working on the social sciences have been increasingly absorbed by a 'mobility turn,' a broad array of research that focuses intellectually on the relationship between communication technologies and physical travel; on different forms of transport, travel and communication; on the movement of capital, information, power, ideas and labour; and on the contrast between the hypermobility of capital and the territorial motionless of individuals.⁴⁸⁴ He claims:

Circulation is a powerful notion [...] had many impacts upon the social world [...] systems increasingly develop in which there is an obligation to be circulating, and this is true of water, sewage, people, money, ideas. There is in the modern world an accumulation of movement that is analogous to the accumulation of capital—repetitive movement or circulation made possible by diverse, interdependent mobility-systems[...] Some pre-industrial mobility systems included walking, horse-riding, sedan chairs, coach travel, inland waterways, sea shipping and so on [...]⁴⁸⁵

Academics and theorists have analysed the stark contrasts between, on the one hand, the confined conditions of deskilled labour that impair physical mobility and have eschewed the lens of the camera and, on the other, the movement that characterises workers leaving the factory that, as Farocki's film indicates, has had an important role to play in the history of cinema. Walter Benjamin, for instance,

⁴⁸⁴ John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2007), pp. 5-6.

⁴⁸⁵ Urry, *Mobilities*, p.13.

emphasised, in a well-known passage, the film's potential to short-circuit the seemingly static images that frame factory and prison life with the potentially liberating ability of film to record movement:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appear to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the mist of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling.⁴⁸⁶

Following Benjamin's statement, while factories hold us in place, film has the capacity to release us by allowing travel to far-flung virtual worlds. The importance of workers in movement is highlighted by the female narrator of the Farocki's film, when she says that Lumière's film represented 'the first time that people in motion could be seen.' In a similar note, art historian and philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman states that Lumière's film showed for the very first time 'movement of the lower classes' adding '[...] it was while making their exit from the factory that the people made their entrance—and thereby benefited from a new form of exposure—on the stage of the cinematographic era.'⁴⁸⁷ For him, these scenes turned workers into actors creating an environment whereby a 'political meeting' could take place, albeit one whose location was confined to the virtual dimension of film.

And yet, although I subscribe to Benjamin's and Didi-Huberman's positive outlook, in *Performing the Border* there is an additional gendered valence: the disparity between the hypermobility of capital and the incarceration of the maquiladora woman worker. Images of capital as mobile are not new and, in fact, anthropologist Nicholas de Genova points out that Marx often describes capital with qualifiers such as 'energy,' 'unrest,' 'motion' and 'movement.'⁴⁸⁸ Turning to a contemporary context, geographer Nadine Cattán argues that low-wage jobs held by

⁴⁸⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 229.

⁴⁸⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman, 'People Exposed, People as Extras,' in *Spheres of Action: Art and Politics*, ed. Éric Alliez and Peter Osborne (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), p. 33.

⁴⁸⁸ Nicholas de Genova, 'The deportation regime: sovereignty, space and the freedom of movement,' in *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space and the Freedom of Movement*, ed. Nicholas de Genova and Nathalie Peutz (Durham: Duke University, 2010), p.40.

women do not correspond to our images of the hypermobility allowed by globalisation.⁴⁸⁹ This argument is advanced in *Performing the Border* when Jottar claims that there is a situation whereby '[...] the crossing of people is forbidden [...] Goods cross but the people who produce the goods don't cross.' Similarly, geographer Kevin R. Cox maintains that 'Alongside images of mobile capital continually shifting locations from one point of production to another, are images of workers as equally immobile.'⁴⁹⁰ Even though, as Cox also remarks, labour may also sometimes move, as today's migratory patterns reveal, maquiladora workers do not and are instead locked into an economy of violence facilitated and enabled, if not actually constructed, by Juárez's corporate culture. In line with these arguments, Biemann explains that:

Juárez [...] unashamedly exposes the conditions under which the technologies which facilitate a mobile, digital and obsessively visual society are produced. *Performing the Border* localizes this footloose, digital culture to a particular place and embodies it through the figure of the Mexican female cyborg, positively integrated in the technological assembly process, who returns to her shack without running water or electricity at night.⁴⁹¹

As intimated by this statement, a tension is maintained throughout the video-essay between the mobility of capital and the stationary position of the female maquiladora worker. Circulation is a powerful notion, as Urry noted, and as Biemann's passage foregrounds. In this instance, it is evoked by the mobilities of technology and capital and by the lack thereof in the living conditions of the worker—no running water, no electricity, slow and ineffective transportation. These im(mobilities), in my view, can offer a different albeit complementary explanation to the questions I posed earlier: Why is deskilled labour in a Mexican-U.S. context absent from the field of representation and, more specifically, from the arena of moving images? What is the most effective way of capturing the complexities and nuances of the labour performed

⁴⁸⁹ Nadine Cattán, 'Gendering Mobility: Insights into the Construction of Spatial Concepts,' in *Gendered Mobilities*, ed. Tanu Priya Uteng and Tim Cresswell (Hampshire and Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), p.91.

⁴⁹⁰ Kevin R. Cox, 'Globalization and the Politics of Distribution: A Critical Assessment,' in *Spaces of Globalization: Reasserting the Power of the Local*, ed. Kevin R. Cox (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1997), p.126.

⁴⁹¹ Biemann, 'Making the Transnational Intelligible,' p. 20.

by maquila workers? I will examine these im(mobilities) in Biemann's video by looking at vehicular and corporeal movements, as they are shaped and determined by contemporary labour conditions of the Mexico-U.S. border.

In relation to vehicular mobility, a significant part of Biemann's essay consists of images of transit. In her essay *Performing the Border* Biemann explains the prominence of transportation and time management in these women's lives:

Time management is another efficient means of control. For practical reasons, the industrial parks are located in the outskirts of the city. Regular public transport doesn't go there so at the changing of the shifts private companies shuttle the workers back and forth between the city center and the plants at exorbitant fares that can swallow up to a third of one's monthly salary. Before dawn the worker leaves the settlement at the periphery, walks to the bus station in the center of town, and takes one hour bus ride out to the maquila to make the morning shift at six o'clock. She spends nine hours in the plant and goes home the same way. That leaves no time to live, no time to think, no time to organize. The worker's excruciating time investment enables the further development of technology that accelerates our lives.⁴⁹²

Visually, this is reinforced by numerous scenes that display the view from her car window—often tinted in a variety of hues—including the opening scene where we are shown various imposing maquiladora plants (**Plate 3.1**). In fact, the video opens with a shot of the inside of a moving car and many of the interviews are conducted whilst driving in the region. Bus transportation also features strongly in the video essay (**Plates 3.25 and 3.26**), showing the poor public transport infrastructure of Juárez in which women spend an inordinate amount of time to commute to and from work. There is a scene where Biemann films the morning bus that takes workers to the factory during the (painfully) early hours of the morning. The subtitle informs us that it is 4:30 am and Biemann claims in the voiceover that '[...] in the early morning hours, a great number of women cross through these widely undefined spaces on their way to the maquiladoras, in transit between private and work space, between desert and urban space.' There is another inserted footage showing a man on a boat crossing the

⁴⁹² Biemann, 'Performing the Border,' p. 107.

Río Bravo—a boundary that is part of the Río Grande that separates Mexico and the U.S. South of Texas and New Mexico —and there are tinted scenes of men on horseback (**Plates 3.27 and 3.28**).

Many academics have studied the relationship between vehicular, capital and bodily movements. Today's transport mobilities, as sociologist David Bissell and media expert Gillian Fuller point out, are dependent on an infrastructure that sustains movement. They add that '[...]movement means that mobility is always contingent: the speedy movement of some is, to varying extents, contingent on the stalling of others.'⁴⁹³ Harvey has similarly argued that there is a 'struggle to command space,' largely contingent on the availability of money, making car ownership highly valuable because it gives the individual the ability to 'command and protect space.'⁴⁹⁴ In like manner, discussing the public transport infrastructure of Los Angeles, which can be described as mediocre at best, geographer Tim Cresswell notes that 'The geography of work and travel reflects the spatiality of patriarchy, structural racism, and the division of labor.'⁴⁹⁵ He continues to argue that the poor citizens of Los Angeles are embedded in a 'kinetic hierarchy' whereby the mobility of individuals—what he calls 'prosthetic citizens'—is not based on their own bodily capacities but rather on the 'urban environment as prosthesis.'⁴⁹⁶ This idea of prosthetic im(mobilities) are foregrounded in Biemann's essay by the strong contrast between the fast movement of her car—from where she films the long sequence of maquiladora facades, accompanied by electronic music—and the mostly static camera that captures the shanty towns of Juárez, where people live, as the subtitle informs us, at a dry heat of 42°C. (**Plate 3.29**). The shots of shanty towns do not have the fast-paced soundtrack that characterises the footage related to the maquiladoras; they are left intact with their corresponding ambient sounds, underscoring the change of pace from urban to rural life, as well as the grim reality of the inhabitants. Their movements are constrained by the city's lack of adequate infrastructure in spite of the fact that it is the home of the

⁴⁹³ David Bissell and Gillian Fuller, 'Stillness Unbound,' in *Stillness in a Mobile World*, ed. David Bissell and Gillian Fuller (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p.4.

⁴⁹⁴ David Harvey, 'Money, Time, Space and the City,' in *The Urban Experience* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 197.

⁴⁹⁵ Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (London: Routledge, 2006), p.172

⁴⁹⁶ Cresswell, *On the Move*, p.173.

most sophisticated technology in the world. In the voiceover, Biemann claims that Juárez is:

[...] inhabited by millions of people who vacillate between rural and urban, between a world of street vendors, streets of sand and the production of high-tech equipment for the information industry. Within short, the new technological culture of repetition, registration and controlling was introduced to this desert city.

In a similar vein, social and cultural anthropologist Sarah S. Jain argues that there is an inherent violence in building cities primarily for car travel. Streets, she rightly points out, are public spaces and navigating these should be considered as a basic necessity.⁴⁹⁷ Emphasising this violence, *Performing the Border* shows the public transport system simply not reaching the citizens who are most in need. In addition, in Biemann's video-essay the violence inherent in the city's fabric, referred to by Jain, and the violence that the female body has to endure in Juárez are intimately intertwined. In the voiceover she claims '[...] the borders between the personal formations within the large-scale social reality out there get blurred.' Resonating strongly with Biemann's contention, feminist academic Elizabeth Grosz, in a well-known essay published in 1995, four years before *Performing the Border*, drew a parallel between the urban fabric and female corporeal experience. Grosz writes:

[...] The city in its particular geographical, architectural, spatializing, municipal arrangements is one particular ingredient in the social constitution of the body [...] the form, structure, and norms of the city seep into and affect all the other elements that go into the constitution of corporeality and/as subjectivity.⁴⁹⁸

In this way, Grosz analyses the inside and the outside of the body, proposing a model of symbiotic relationship between embodied experience and its constructed environment. For Grosz, the city is crucial in the 'social production of (sexed)

⁴⁹⁷ Sarah S. Jain, 'Urban Violence: Luxury in made Space,' in *Mobile Technologies of the City*, ed. Mimi Sheller and John Urry (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p.66.

⁴⁹⁸ Elizabeth Grosz, 'Bodies-Cities,' in *Places Through the Body*, ed. Heidi J. Nast and Steve Pile (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 47.

corporeality,' providing an 'organization that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies.'⁴⁹⁹ Like Haraway, as I discussed earlier, Grosz analyses the intersection between the body and technology, stating that in the future the '[...] body's limbs and organs will become interchangeable parts.'⁵⁰⁰ This statement is in tune with Biemann's aforementioned claim that in Juárez the body can be thought of in terms of 'dis-assembly and re-assembly', whereby the 'computerization of labor is intimately implicated in material transformations.'⁵⁰¹

Bodies and the urban fabric are shown in Biemann's video-essay as imbricated, feeding off one another's rhythms, movements and economies, in a seemingly endless cycle. Shortly I will discuss the importance of rhythm in the video-essay but for now I will examine the numerous images Biemann includes of women dancing. Indeed, in the video-essay, corporeal movements are also emphasised through the images of dance. These include numerous scenes of women provocatively dancing in the nightclubs of Juárez; women half-heartedly and repetitively dancing to promote Corona beer; as well as women dressed as mariachis, professionally dancing on television (**Plates 3.30, 3.31 and 3.32**). Especially in the scenes of women dancing in nightclubs, Biemann draws a strong contrast between, on the one hand, the repetitive movement required in the assembly line and, on the other, the hedonistic movements promoted and enabled by Juárez's nightlife.

Earlier I underlined the importance in the history of film of images of workers leaving the factory, but dance scenes have also had an important role. Dance expert Sherril Dodds points out that, as much as speeding trains and labourers leaving the factory, early cinema also paid particular attention to dance and the musical.⁵⁰² Since the development of film in 1895, Dodds continues, it became clear that dance 'was particularly compatible with the filmic form' due to two factors: firstly, they are both characterised by motion and, secondly, that 'the art of editing shares similarities with

⁴⁹⁹ Grosz, 'Bodies-Cities,' p.43.

⁵⁰⁰ Grosz, 'Bodies-Cities,' p.50.

⁵⁰¹ Grosz, 'Bodies-Cities,' p.50.

⁵⁰² Sherril Dodds, *Dance on Screen: Genres and Media from Hollywood to Experimental Art* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp.4-5.

the rhythmic component of dance.’⁵⁰³ She exemplifies this contention with Louis Lumière’s recording of a variety of ‘indigenous’ dance forms as well as Fernand Léger’s *Ballet Mécanique* (1924-45), a film that, in her words, explored the ‘rhythmic structures in movement and music.’⁵⁰⁴

Discussing the history of dance, Cresswell notes that whereas work imposes constraints on bodily movements, dance—usually associated with free time—can be thought of as ‘a realm of freedom’ although, as I will discuss, this activity is also heavily entangled with various power systems.⁵⁰⁵ Similarly, cultural studies professor Janet Wolff asserts that ‘[...] dance is perceived as creative, it is seen to articulate the [...] expressions of the body.’⁵⁰⁶ Several academics have also considered the relationship between deskilled or industrial labour and dance culture. Cultural studies theorist Angela McRobbie, for instance, argues that ‘Historians of working-class culture have acknowledged the place occupied by dance in leisure and the opportunities it has afforded for courtship, relaxation, and even riotous behaviour[...].’⁵⁰⁷ This chimes with Biemann’s assertion, mentioned above, that the dance hall is a place where women are allowed to freely express their sexual desires. One of the women interviewed by Biemann in Juárez narrates how girls, as early as fourteen or fifteen years of age, are earning money at the maquilas and how the independence that this earning capacity gives them facilitates their entry into the nocturnal life of the city. She continues:

The only forms of entertainment here are the nocturnal dance centres and drinking places, where they go dancing since the work done at the factory is a very tiring routine. Most of these women are assemblers. These activities do not produce any knowledge, on the contrary, they produce major stress [...] So when the girls leave the factory, what they need is either to relax or have fun.

⁵⁰³ Dodds, *Dance on Screen*, pp.4-5.

⁵⁰⁴ Dodds, *Dance on Screen*, pp.4-5.

⁵⁰⁵ Cresswell, *On the Move*, p.123.

⁵⁰⁶ Janet Wolff, ‘Dance criticism: Feminism, theory and choreography,’ in *Resident Alien: Feminist Cultural Criticism*, ed. Janet Wolff (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 80.

⁵⁰⁷ Angela McRobbie, ‘Dance Narratives and Fantasies of Achievement,’ in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), pp.211-212.

In addition, in her adjunct essay to *Performing the Border*, Biemann constantly stresses the colonisation of free time by corporate globalisation stating that ‘time management is another efficient means of control.’⁵⁰⁸ In the video-essay, scenes at the homes of the maquila workers—supposedly where they spend their ‘leisure time’—more often than not consist of women performing household chores, such as washing clothes. Numerous theorists and artists also elaborate on the notion of ‘free time’ and describe how commuting eats away at leisure time—notably French theorist Guy Debord, who wrote in 1959 that ‘[...]commuting time is a form of ‘surplus labor which correspondingly reduces the amount of free time.’⁵⁰⁹ More recently, political philosopher Antonio Negri, in his book *Time for Revolution*, yearns for a situation where ‘[...] liberated time [...is not] the residue of exploited time, but [...] rather the force that destroys and breaks up all the links of capitalist society.’⁵¹⁰ In fact, both Farocki and Sekula underline the importance of ‘free time’ and the constant blurring between private and working life that factory labour entails. In *Workers Leaving the Factory*, the voiceover claims that ‘Nowadays one cannot tell at a glance whether a passer-by has come from work, sport or the welfare office.’ Sekula makes a similar point arguing that:

Nowadays, when the inner body is colonized in terms Foucault has described, when the body is relentlessly disciplined and *leisure itself is converted into work*, when all of life is submitted to the cycle of production and consumption, one realizes that it all began in the 1880s, with the coming of the second industrial revolution.⁵¹¹ [My emphasis].

Cultural studies professor Iain Chambers, elucidating the effects of industrial labour on free time, argues that dance offers a release from industrial society’s ‘bludgeoning’

⁵⁰⁸ Biemann, ‘Performing the Border,’ p. 107.

⁵⁰⁹ Guy Debord, ‘Situationist Theses on Traffic,’ in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p.69.

⁵¹⁰ Antonio Negri, *Time for Revolution*, trans. Matteo Mandarini (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p.120.

⁵¹¹ Katarzyna Ruchel-Stockmans, ‘Interview with Allan Sekula,’ in *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art: Around Allan Sekula’s Photography*, ed. Jan Baetens and Hilde Van Gelder (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2006), p. 142.

and often repressive routine, an assertion that can be directly applied to the maquilas.⁵¹² According to Chambers, music ‘can be considered an important “counter-space” that exists somewhere between private and public space, and “[...] is not an “escape” from “reality” but an interrogative exploration of its organising categories.’⁵¹³

A less positive light on dance as a liberating endeavour is articulated by Cresswell, for whom dance also shows an ‘[...]array of disciplinary practices and deep-rooted ideologies of mobility.’⁵¹⁴ In Biemann’s video-essay, the carefully choreographed scenes of women dancing to mariachi music, or of women swaying their hips to promote Corona beer, reveal dance’s more disciplinary dimension, contrasting strongly with the scenes at dance clubs where women attempt to find release from their daily oppressive routine. Especially in the Corona promotion, women dance monotonously to an equally uninspiring tune, underlining how capital has a vampiric effect on the female body. This is consistent with Dodds observation on how dancing is often used to endorse particular products in order to ‘stimulate and maintain consumer desire [...]’.⁵¹⁵

Art historian Norman Bryson has sensitively proposed to think about dance in terms of ‘socially structured human movement.’⁵¹⁶ For him, ‘meaning arises through mobility,’ but one that operates under a set of rules and constraints, determined by political, cultural and gendered norms.⁵¹⁷ This is what Biemann does in *Performing the Border*: give meaning through the various vignettes of the im(mobilities) of transit and corporeal movement, not only expressed visually—through the choice of scenes, the movement/stasis of the camera and the digitally altered imagery—but also using sound, by the choice of music whose rhythmic pace responds to the conditions of late capitalism and corporate globalisation.

⁵¹² Iain Chambers, *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 2.

⁵¹³ Chambers, *Urban Rhythms*, p.209.

⁵¹⁴ Cresswell, *On the Move*, p.123.

⁵¹⁵ Dodds, *Dance on Screen*, p. 138.

⁵¹⁶ Norman Bryson, ‘Cultural Studies and Dance History,’ in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 58.

⁵¹⁷ Bryson, ‘Cultural Studies,’ p.59.

Importantly, Bryson discusses mobility in relation to the Industrial Revolution, drawing parallels between dancing and the mechanical processes required by the new labour regime.⁵¹⁸ On this issue, he discusses Manet's *The Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882)—where a barmaid is shown in Paris' vibrant nightlife, and at a distance, perhaps in a mirror reflection, one can also see dancer-acrobats—and Degas' various images of ballerinas. For him, the 'dancer could stand for modernity as a whole'—the paintings depicts spectacle, popular entertainment, state of movement and liberated sexual practices.⁵¹⁹ Bryson continues: 'The meshing together of economic and kinetic abstraction in industrialization represents [...] an epochal change in the history of socially structured movement.'⁵²⁰ Biemann, as I mentioned, deliberately transposes old forms of labour with new ones and, I argue, she also consciously connects images of movement that characterised modernity—like the works of Manet and Degas described by Bryson—with the much later corporeal and vehicular mobility promoted by globalisation and Post-Fordist labour.

Biemann's scenes of nightclubs in Juárez represent a momentary respite from the routine of repetitive assembly work. In the voiceover of her video-essay, Biemann claims that Juárez is: 'A zone from which life emerges [...] An alien way of life. Corporate culture in the morning, kneading el *maíz* [corn] at night. The rhythms of the barren highland giving way to optimized production modes.'

I have mentioned above Demos analysis of McQueen's *Western Deep*, where he explains how such routines of repetitive assembly work are underpinned by the theories of scientific management of labour. According to Cresswell the intellectual output of Frederick Taylor—widely considered the father of scientific management—is not one of mobilities but rather of their maximised efficiency.⁵²¹ Discussing Taylor's scientific management 'innovations,' cultural studies theorist Richard Hornsey maintains that assemblage work has integrated the workers into industrial mechanisms. This 'industrial apparatus', according to Hornsey, '[...]determined not

⁵¹⁸ Bryson, 'Cultural Studies,' p. 58.

⁵¹⁹ Bryson, 'Cultural Studies,' p.59.

⁵²⁰ Bryson, 'Cultural Studies,' p. 71.

⁵²¹ Cresswell, *On the Move*, p. 120.

only the goals to which their exertions were directed but the corporeal rhythms of their correlated labour⁵²² This is illustrated in the video-essay when Biemann claims:

By border culture I mean the robotic, repetitive process of assembly work. The intimate implication of the body with technology and the association of this process with the gendered and racialised body. Her body gets fragmented, dehumanized and turned into a disposable, exchangeable, and marketable component.

There is a strong rhythmic quality to this video-essay not only because of the various melodies that are woven together within the visual material—whether robotic and repetitive or more sensually evocative, such as salsa music—but also due to her constant depiction of movement: bodies dancing, women streaming from factory gates, hands assembling small parts. In other words, corporeal, vehicular, and camera movements are engaged into a complexly choreographed dance to reveal the motion and rhythms of corporate globalisation that escape the conventional realms of representation. Both sound and moving images collaborate to exhibit the consequences of the intricate conditions of Juárez. Even Biemann's monotone, almost robotic, delivery of the voiceover is paced rhythmically to adapt to this machine culture. Consonant with my argument, the importance of rhythm in her work is underlined by the statement quoted above: 'The *rhythms* of the barren highland giving way to optimized production modes' (my emphasis).

The affective responses of bodies to multisensory rhythms was pointed out by French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre who, in his book *Rhythmanalysis* (1992), poetically wrote:

Rhythms Rhythms. They reveal and they hide. Much more diverse than in music, or the so-called civil code of successions, relatively simple texts in relation to the City. Rhythms: the music of the City, a scene that listens to itself, an image in the present of a discontinuous sum [...] No camera, no

⁵²² Richard Hornsey, "He Who Thinks, in Modern Traffic, is Lost": Automation and the Pedestrian Rhythms of Interwar London,' in *Geographies of Rhythm: Nature, Place, Mobilities and Bodies*, ed. Tim Edensor (Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), p. 104.

image or series of images can show these rhythms. It requires equally attentive eyes and ears [...].⁵²³

Rhythm, according to Lefebvre, becomes a method for studying the intersection and interplay between spatial and temporal planes and the role of bodies within them.⁵²⁴ Relevant to Biemann's images of workers leaving the factory, Lefebvre describes the give-and-take between crowd and rhythm: '[...] Societies are composed of crowds, of groups, of bodies, of classes, and constitute peoples. They understand the rhythms of which living beings, social bodies, local groups are made up.'⁵²⁵ Lefebvre stresses how rhythms escape the realm of visual representation claiming, later on in his book, that a 'rhythmanalyst' is more sensitive to 'moods than to images [...]' he is capable of listening to a house, a street, a town as one listens to a symphony [...]'⁵²⁶ In the opinion of Lefebvre, we incorrectly tend to associate rhythm with the mechanical rather than the organic.⁵²⁷ 'The body,' holds Lefebvre 'consists of a bundle of rhythms.'⁵²⁸ Through the images of dance and labour Biemann transposes the mechanical to the organic rhythms of the body, thus breaking away from conventional notions. Discussing maquila workers, in the voiceover, Biemann declares: '[...] their time and their bodies, down to the monthly cycle, are controlled by the white male management [...]' Biemann describes how management inspects women's menstruation in order to make sure they are not pregnant—expectant women are fired—suggesting that the fabric of the city is implicated even in the most intimate crevices of the biological rhythms of these female bodies. In other words, the rhythms of capital and those of the body require synchronisation, feeding off each other's cycles.

⁵²³ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p.36.

⁵²⁴ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, pp. 6-20.

⁵²⁵ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, p. 42.

⁵²⁶ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, p. 87.

⁵²⁷ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, p. 6.

⁵²⁸ Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, p 20.

Conclusion

The ethnographic ‘turn’ as it manifested itself in documentary practices can be productively knitted into the history of site-oriented work. . Doing so illustrates how artists working with the documentary form in moving images have creatively and innovatively engaged with issues of space in the virtual dimension of film. Assuming an ethnographic approach, Biemann’s video-essay teases out the ways in which ‘actual space’ is complicit with the smothering—and in the case of the women in Juárez, deadly—forces of capital at work in today’s geopolitical order.

My aim in this chapter has been to think about sensitive, nuanced and innovative ways of representing labour. Biemann effectively does this via the rhythmic quality of her work, through her complex assemblage of polyphonic sounds and polychromatic and multi-patterned images, by taking records and pulses, and by letting go at the cadence of the cycles to which women inhabiting this hellish border zone are subject to. In this way, she holds a stethoscope to the elusive figure of corporate globalisation and the violence it quietly, but brutally, perpetrates against the female body; she wields a resonator that avoids normative forms of representation and detects what always exists somewhere between image and sound, beats and stillness, movement and stasis.

To this day, Biemann’s commitment with the borders continues to be a strong ongoing concern. Indeed, her sustained, articulated and thoughtful visual and written involvement with geopolitical borders has resulted in multi-layered works that shed light on these transnational spaces where the forces and the violence of economic globalisation are, perhaps, at their strongest. The intricacies of her work creatively tease out the nuances of the diffuse violence of factory labour. This violence is not perpetrated by any locatable figure but it is rather abstract and systemic; it surfaces in capital’s variegated incarnations, whether in the form of a corporation, a line manager or simply the urban fabric itself; and it is constantly disciplining the body of the female worker in order for the cycles, rhythms and movements of neoliberal capitalism remain running smoothly and undisturbed. Throughout this chapter, I have examined the conditions of deskilled labour in the Mexico-U.S. border by looking

exclusively at Biemann's work. My main concern here was to unearth meaningful ways of representing the conditions of deskilled labour, a task that has been disquietingly absent from contemporary visual economy, as both Buchloh and Sekula point out. No study about representation and violence in relation to the Mexico-U.S. borderlands would be well rounded and complete, in my view, without taking into account the maquiladora workers. Their labour and even their bodies, as I will elaborate in the fifth chapter, have been used by governmental and corporate agencies to promote a free-trade economic policy that has rendered their lives disposable and precarious. Even though I have not discussed at length the interviews that feature strongly in *Performing the Border*, in the fifth chapter I will analyse the importance of interviews to Biemann's practice.

Chapter Four

Bloodstained Landscapes: Chantal Akerman's Spatial Politics in *From the Other Side*

'The land one possesses,' maintained Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman 'is always a sign of barbarism and blood.'⁵²⁹ There is a connection between violence and the appropriation of territory. As I mentioned in the introduction, political theorist William E. Connolly explains that the word 'territory' derives from the Latin root *terrere*, meaning 'to frighten, to terrorize, to exclude,' whereas *territorium* is defined as a 'place where people are warned.'⁵³⁰ He continues:

[...] Modern territory [...] is land organized and bounded by technical, juridical, and military means [...] to occupy territory [...] is both to receive sustenance and to exercise violence [...] Territory is sustaining land occupied and bounded by violence [...] To territorialize anything is to establish exclusive boundaries around it by warning other people off [...]⁵³¹

For this chapter, I will investigate the way in which Akerman examines the ideologically laden and violent space of the nation-state through aesthetic and formal means in relation to *From the Other Side* of 2002 that documents her journey across the Mexico-U.S. borderlands.

For over four decades, Akerman has produced numerous works covering a variety of genres including romantic comedies, epistolary films, musicals and more recently, since the early 1990s, feature length documentary films, like *From the Other Side*. For this work, Akerman carefully examined the topography of the Sonoran desert that spans one of the busiest crossing points for migrants wanting to reach 'the other side.' In this film, she interweaves extended duration shots of her driving in the

⁵²⁹ From an unpublished text quoted in Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2002), p.75.

⁵³⁰ William E. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization (Borderlines)*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. xxiii.

⁵³¹ Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, p.xxiii.

region—musing over the idiosyncrasies of the landscape—with interviews on both sides of the border, focusing on the town of Agua Prieta, Sonora and Douglas, Arizona. From families of migrants who have died in this crossing to the sheriff of Douglas, Akerman's interviewees paint a complex picture of this geopolitical area.

I will be particularly concerned with the way the landscape of the Mexico-U.S. borderlands is often represented and conceived as a battleground and as a tabula rasa that resists attempts at domestication and colonisation. I will pay attention to the figure of the migrant and the aesthetic strategies that Akerman employs in order to represent their journeys across the border. Underlining the systemic violence of the region, Akerman shows how the U.S., by escalating 'security' measures at the border, has forced migrants to take more dangerous and often deadly routes across the border. Unpacking and critically engaging with Akerman's ethnographic sensibility, I will start by discussing her documentary films in relation to the genre of the travelogue. Showing how Akerman addresses political issues through aesthetic and formal means and analysing her debt to structuralist filmmakers, I will look at the work of academics who have argued that representations of land are not neutral but, on the contrary, ideological constructs that play a pivotal role in nation-state building projects. I will then link these concerns with art historical debates surrounding site-oriented practices again drawing on the writings of Miwon Kwon, Hal Foster and James Meyer whilst contextualising her work within minimalist and land art practices. I will draw on phenomenological theories so as to examine the effects of her extended duration shots in relation to the manner in which she focuses on landscape. Finally, I will analyse how Akerman links the process of mapping land to violence and claim that Akerman's film attempts to portray a 'smooth' space as theorised by Deleuze and Guattari.

Embracing a Culture of Itinerancy: Ethnographic Travelogues

Not unlike an ethnographer, for the most part, Akerman observes the subjects that she films with almost clinical precision. Discussing Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), film critic Ivone Margulies, author of *Nothing*

Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday, argues that '[...] The comparison of Akerman to an ethnographer is not to be discarded, for an understanding of the ethnographer's ideas of objectivity and distance enriches her work.'⁵³² *Jeanne Dielman* documents three days in the life of a single mother and part-time prostitute as she goes about her mundane routine of cleaning and cooking. With her characteristic long duration shots, Akerman reveals Jeanne's compulsive need for order.

For Margulies, the ethnographic quality of *Jeanne Dielman* comes Akerman's visual cross-examinations—akin to an ethnographer's participant-observation techniques—that lend a voyeuristic character to her films. This comparison of Akerman with an ethnographer has become even more pertinent in her recent non-fiction works where she travels to numerous locations in order to create documentary films. During the last couple of decades, Akerman has created four films—including *From the Other Side*—based on her trips to a particular place. In the first one, *D'Est* (1993), she travels across the former Soviet block recording mundane and prosaic scenes of everyday life. Instead of focusing on the more conspicuous political climate that marked the end of the Soviet regime, she chose instead to zoom in on, amongst others, people waiting in line in a train station, the changing landscape viewed through her car window as well as passers-by involved in their daily routine, oblivious of the camera recording them from a café window. In the form of a travelogue, Akerman starts her journey in Germany, crosses both Poland and the Baltics and finishes her trip in Moscow. Six years after the release of this film she created *Sud* (South) in which she travels to the American South to document racial conflicts in this region, concentrating on the story of African American John Byrd who had recently been brutally murdered by three white men on account of his race. *From the Other Side* followed in 2002 and the last of these projects, *Là bas* (Over There) created in 2006, documents her stay in Tel Aviv in which Akerman barely left her apartment. Instead of showing the life of Tel Aviv's denizens in the manner that characterised her

⁵³² Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996, p.8.

three earlier films, she focused instead on her personal space, building a tenuous connection to the outside world via the views from her window.⁵³³

Apart from being based on Akerman's travels these four films share other important characteristics. They all focus on everyday life in a region that has recently experienced some kind of conflict; they all lack voiceover or any clear narrative; and the short titles always denote a sense direction. In an interview, discussing the first three films in 2005—a year before *Over There* was made—she claims that: 'I didn't think about when I was making the films, but after the three were finished, I decided they were a trilogy.'⁵³⁴ Scott MacDonald, the film academic who conducted this interview, pointed out to Akerman that her involvement with a particular place is strongly reminiscent of her earlier film *News From Home* (1976). In this film, Akerman wanders the streets of New York City focusing on passers-by waiting at subway stations or simply walking on the city's streets, lacking any sort of dramatic tension.⁵³⁵ Akerman does not—except for the last scene—feature the iconic sites of New York City; rather, she focuses on unidentifiable locations, captured at ground level, painting a portrait of the everyday life of the city's inhabitants, often as they wait to get to a destination.⁵³⁶

News From Home, *Sud*, *From the East* and *From the Other Side* all provide us with a form of virtual travel to a particular location. The first three films of the tetralogy can be characterised as a travelogue—a documentary often anchored in the exploration of new or unknown territory—that, as film academic Stella Bruzzi argues, is the 'documentary equivalent of a road movie.'⁵³⁷ Akerman has stressed her affinity with cinema from the silent era and, in many ways, *From the Other Side* displays a kinship with early 20th century travelogues since the trajectory of the film is dictated

⁵³³ Marion Schmid, *Chantal Akerman* (Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2010), pp.98-127.

⁵³⁴ Scott MacDonald, 'Chantal Akerman On *D'Est*, *Sud* and *De l'autre côté*,' in *A Critical Cinema 4: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2005), p.272.

⁵³⁵ MacDonald, 'Chantal Akerman,' p.259.

⁵³⁶ Jennifer M. Barker, 'The Feminine Side of New York: Travelogue, Autobiography and Architecture in *News From Home*,' in *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*, ed. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), p. 41-49.

⁵³⁷ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 100.

by the turns she makes on the road without any apparent narrative.⁵³⁸ Early examples include the Lumière brothers' travelogues all of 1896, that featured the cities of Jerusalem (*Leaving Jerusalem by Railway*) and London (*Hyde Park, London*) as well as natural landmarks such as in *Niagara Falls*.⁵³⁹ Film and media studies professor Fatimah Tobing Rony argues, in her examination of the history of the travelogue, that those travelogues which were made in the early 20th century often focus on the landscape and are often shot—like Akerman does recurrently in her work—from a moving vehicle such as a train (like *Leaving Jerusalem by Railway*) (**Plate 4.1**). In these films, the focus is often on the moving body of the filmmaker who undergoes a set of different cultural activities.⁵⁴⁰ Rony claims that these travel films offer the world as an '[...]"archive" of human variation, and allowed the viewer a way to travel without leaving home, just as the research film enabled the anthropologist to remain in his armchair.'⁵⁴¹ These films, particularly popular between the years 1907 to 1915, were often considered educational and were labelled nonfiction.⁵⁴²

MacDonald, who interviewed Akerman, has claimed that independent filmmakers working in the 1960s and 1970s, looking to launch a 'broad and penetrating critique' of the kind of films promoted by Hollywood, also 'often share[d] an interest in landscape [...].'⁵⁴³ Travelling by car in rural landscapes, in the way Akerman does, has been a popular activity shared by many artists, including journalist James Agee and photographer Walker Evans. On an assignment for the popular magazine *Fortune* in 1936, they drove from New York to Alabama in order to create a photographic essay about the plight of farmers struggling to cope with the Depression during the mid 1930s. Although the article never came to fruition largely due to Agee's unwillingness to bend to the rules of journalism, the project materialised in 1941 in the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that featured many portraits of the people

⁵³⁸ Schmid, *Chantal Akerman*, p.4.

⁵³⁹ Jennier Lynn Peterson, *Education in the School of Dreams: Travelogues and Early Nonfiction Film* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 3.

⁵⁴⁰ Fatimah Robing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 83.

⁵⁴¹ Robing Rony, *The Third Eye*, p.85.

⁵⁴² Peterson, *Education in the School of Dreams*, p.2.

⁵⁴³ Scott MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine: A field Guide to Independent Films about Place* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001), p. 4.

they photographed along their journey (**Plate 4.2**).⁵⁴⁴ Like Agee and Evans, Akerman also interweaves her long duration scenes of the landscape with interviews of the region's inhabitants, attempting to portray their everyday realities.

The travelogue, according to Bruzzi, 'Is [...] fundamentally not structured around an argument or indeed around a desire to impose narrative cohesion; it is simply a chronicle of events linked by location, personality or theme.'⁵⁴⁵ Although in *From the Other Side* Akerman gives no explanation as to why she embarked on this trip, in an interview she explains: 'I went to Mexico to see what was happening, with no conception of what kind of film, if any, I would do.'⁵⁴⁶ The fact that she had 'no conception' of what kind of film she wanted to make and that she wished to remain 'open' suggests that the film, at least partly, was about her own journey to the Mexico-U.S. borderlands, a personal travelogue that we are invited to witness. Indeed, this unpremeditated creative process has marked Akerman's filmmaking career throughout, even her fiction films. In 1975 she claimed:

In my films I follow an opposite trajectory to that of the makers of political films. They have a skeleton, an idea and then they put it on flesh: I have in the first place the flesh, the skeleton appears later.⁵⁴⁷

Both the fiction films that characterised her work from the 1970s and the more recent documentary films do not rely on a premeditated coherent structure or argument but rather develop throughout the filming process.

In the case of *From the Other Side*, Bruzzi's definition of the travelogue dovetails with Akerman's *modus operandi*—we solely accompany Akerman during her car journey, the stops she makes whilst filming and the interviews she conducts, with no detectable narrative. We are never told where she is or exactly where she is heading, perhaps because she does not know herself. In some segments it is often difficult to pinpoint on what side of the border she is, even though, of course, there is a stark

⁵⁴⁴ Jeff Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp.93-94.

⁵⁴⁵ Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, p.101.

⁵⁴⁶ MacDonald, 'Chantal Akerman,' p. 267.

⁵⁴⁷ Chantal Akerman quoted in Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, p. 42.

contrast between the socio-economic conditions of the two regions. The location that Akerman features in *From the Other Side* provides us with a form of travel to a region that, although a very busy zone of transit is, unlike the early travelogues, far from a popular tourist destination. In her ethnographic travelogue, she also takes us into less travelled spaces, sometimes through dirt roads. We are privy to the spaces that illegal migrants travel, which are rarely depicted in mainstream forms of representation, largely due to their secret and illicit nature.

Whether recording the denizens of New York City, Eastern Europe, the Mexican-U.S. border or, more simply, the movements of a woman undertaking chores in her kitchen, her almost intrusive ethnographic gaze remains characteristic throughout her works. In many ways, Akerman's projects correspond to the characteristics that Foster assigns to the 'artist as ethnographer,' especially in relation to her participant observation techniques. *News from Home*, *From the East, Sud* and *From the Other Side* also all involve travel to a particular location and all intently observe the inhabitants of 'foreign lands.' Conforming to the assumptions that Foster outlines in his essay, '[...] the site is [...] in the field of the other [...] with the social other [...] with the cultural other'.⁵⁴⁸ The 'other' in the case of Akerman's films includes a wide variety of subjects: a Belgian mother who prostitutes herself, New York City's residents as well as the inhabitants of the Mexico-U.S. borderlands.

The way that Akerman creates her films—especially the documentary pieces she made in the 1990s—dovetails with a culture of itinerancy in the art world that James Meyer has identified, where the mobility of the artist is '[...]thematized as a random and poetic interaction with the objects and spaces of everyday life.'⁵⁴⁹ Ample criticism has been directed towards the tendency to romanticise the figure of the nomadic and itinerant artist in search of 'meaning.' Especially since, more often than not, the nomadism that Meyer identifies is tightly intertwined with an non-reflexive ethnographic sensibility. Akerman has claimed that:

⁵⁴⁸ Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 173.

⁵⁴⁹ James Meyer, 'Nomads: Figures of Travel in Contemporary Art,' in *Site-Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, ed. Alex Coles (London: Blackdog Publishing, 2000), p.11.

I wanted to go to the Mexican-American border because I read an article in the newspaper and was struck by the words used by one of the Americans who was quoted in the article: One word he used was “dirt”—“We don’t want that dirt”; “They’re going to bring dirt.” That made me think of other times in history when the word ‘dirt’ was used: for example, for the Jews—“dirty Jews” [...] I went there to have an adventure [...] ⁵⁵⁰

This ‘sense of adventure’ echoes strongly with the exoticism and primitivising fantasies—if not neo-colonialist incursions—that so often accompany ethnographic practices. In the words of Foster, it can risk ‘ideological patronage,’ indulge in ‘[...] a romanticism of the other at the margins,’⁵⁵¹ and in a ‘[...] self-idealization in which the anthropologist is remade as an artistic interpreter of the cultural text[...].’⁵⁵² It also adheres to a trend that Kwon has identified in contemporary art practices where there is a ‘[...] reemergence of the centrality of the artist as a progenitor of meaning [...] this renewed focus on the artist in the name of authorial self-reflexivity leads to a hermetic implosion of autobiographical and subjective indulgences.’⁵⁵³ By claiming that she went to the border to ‘have an adventure’ she reinforces the ‘border-as-spectacle’ that I outlined in the introduction where the border is imagined as a violent and dangerous place that has to be protected and obsessively monitored.

Her statement, however, seems to be strongly at odds with the slow-paced, unplanned quality and contemplative tone of her film. Even though, in theory, the most adventurous part of her journey should be crossing the actual border, she never lets us know when this takes place. In fact, at certain points of the film, we are left wondering what side of the border she is in. There is no narrative and her camera lingers on mundane landscapes and scenes from every day life. Throughout her film, when the camera does move, it is more often than not because it is located in the inside of her car allowing us to observe the landscape it. Her aesthetic of travel is far from fast-paced and heavily edited films that are characteristic of works trying to evoke a sense of adventure. Therefore, for the moment, I will put Akerman’s

⁵⁵⁰ MacDonald, ‘Chantal Akerman,’ p. 267.

⁵⁵¹ Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer,’ p.182.

⁵⁵² Foster, ‘The Artist as Ethnographer,’ p.180.

⁵⁵³ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specificity and Locational Identity* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2002), p.51.

unfortunate statement to one side and consider what her film does critically add to our understanding of the borderlands.

A Blank Slate? Representation of the Mexico- U.S. Border

In what follows, I will evaluate how Akerman's rendering of the Mexico-U.S. border landscape contrasts strongly with the representation of this geographical area in mainstream media. The intense focus on landscape in *From the Other Side* inverts the normative balance between background (landscape) and foreground (characters). I will also examine the work of academics that have claimed that representations of landscape are not neutral but rather play powerfully into ideas of national identity. The Mexico-U.S. border is frequently described as a blank slate, often in relation to the desertic terrain that Akerman portrays, where the U.S. can rehearse its war mentality and reinforce a sense of national identity. I will embed this discussion within the historical, popular and military representations of the border.

In *From the Other Side*, as Akerman travels through the Mexican-U.S. border, her filming allows us to study this pallid and infertile land from various vantage points: from relatively populated areas—like Douglas and Nogales—to uninhabited and barren terrains that are seen from the motorway; from mountainous regions to what appears to be an endless flat terrain. Showing both smooth and rugged terrain Akerman pays attention to the texture of the landscape (**Plates 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5**). At times, we see still and clear vistas and at others we contemplate the windy desert enveloped by a sandy mist. Sometimes the scenery is punctuated by human constructs that range from flimsy palings and signs to imposing fences; others, it consists of vistas seemingly free of any type of human interference (**Plates 4.6, 4.7, 4.8 and 4.9**). The colour palette of the film remains monotonous, switching from beige to yellow tints that characterise the inhospitable Sonoran desert intermittently broken up by colourfully painted houses in which the interviews take place (**Plate 4.10**). In the long duration shots, the Mexico-U.S. border is shown in both its diurnal luminosities and its nocturnal obscurities (**Plates 4.11 and 4.12**). During the day we can muse over the desertcape turning from the red, orange, and yellow early

morning tones to the night's darkness that, when shown without the electric lighting of urban areas, renders the view imperceptible except for the flashing lights coming from Akerman's car **(Plate 4.13)**. The long duration shots allow ample time to contemplate this continuously shifting landscape in which the wind scatters the sand particles, erasing the traces that it might once have held. As if trying to keep our attention focused on the scenery there is no voiceover, only ambient sounds.

For historian Simon Schama '[...] landscapes[...] are printed with our tenacious inescapable obsessions'⁵⁵⁴ and the Mexico-U.S. border is imprinted with the obsession of protecting the nation. The borderlands are often conceived of as the battleground where the unwanted and the dangerous are safely kept at bay. Or as a playing field—recall Peter Andreas claim that I mentioned in the introduction that the militarisation of the border '[...] has some of the features of ritualized spectator sport.'⁵⁵⁵ The border is conceived as a membrane that, without adequate border policing, can dangerously force its pores open to unwanted migrants or other threatening foreign elements. In *From the Other Side* Akerman underlines the perceived pollution that migrants perpetrate on 'American soil.' In an interview in a café at Douglas, Akerman asks a man about the impact that migrants have on his town. He answers: 'They catch them all the time. Every night [...] People that live down here are sick of them. They can't sleep at night. Animals are all gone from the river because there's movement all night long.' Akerman shows a long duration shot of a sign that reads 'Stop the Crime Wave! Environment is Being Trashed by Invaders!' **(Plate 4.16)**.

Latin American professor Rosa Linda Fregoso contends that in popular entertainment the border is often conceived as an '[...]otherized territory [...that is] symptomatic of a colonialist and racist imaginary.'⁵⁵⁶ This is illustrated in an interview that Akerman conducts in Douglas with a man who speaks of the fear of disease, and even terrorism, stemming from incoming Mexican migrants. For protection, he defends himself with guns: 'anybody that comes into my property [...] they are

⁵⁵⁴ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), p.18

⁵⁵⁵ Peter Andreas, *Border Games: Policing the U.S. Mexico Divide* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. xiv.

⁵⁵⁶ Rosa Linda Fregoso, 'Recycling Colonialist Fantasies on the Texas Borderlands,' in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, ed. Hamid Naficy (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), p. 178.

trespassers[...] I am supposed to be able to protect myself and whatever comes along [...].’ This exemplifies the observation made by artist and activist Bertha Jottar, that I mentioned in the introduction, that the border ‘is always represented as a wound that has to be healed, that has to be closed, that has to be protected, from contamination and from disease [...]’⁵⁵⁷

As many academics have pointed out, the representations of land—or landscapes—are not free from ideological underpinnings but are rather strong constructs that powerfully play into our sense of national identity. For instance, geographer Gillian Rose has rightly remarked:

[...]Landscape’s meanings draw on the cultural codes of the society for which it was made. These codes are embedded in social power structures, and [in] theorizations of the relationship between culture and society by [the] new cultural geographers[...].’⁵⁵⁸

In discussing film, and in line with Rose’s argument, geographer Ellena dell’Agnese holds that the Mexico-U.S. border landscape—along with its inhabitants—have constituted a popular topic since the very inception of moving pictures and that the borderlands often represent a ‘way of “narrating” the nation.’⁵⁵⁹ Also in relation to the Mexico-U.S. border, geographer Patricia L. Price maintains that since the Mexican American War of 1848 ‘Anglo expansionists’ envisioned the landscape as a tabula rasa waiting to be inscribed with narratives of nationhood.⁵⁶⁰ The desert, continues Price, was ‘approached as a lack,’ and continues to claim that it was a ‘narrative inscription typical of Anglo-American nationalism [...] It was a perceived blankness of the Western landscape in the national geoimaginary.’⁵⁶¹ The desert in particular, as it exists in the geopolitical imaginary, easily lends itself for this purpose—for it is a place

⁵⁵⁷ Ursula Biemann, ‘Interview with Bertha Jottar,’ in *Been There and Back to Nowhere: Gender in Transnational Spaces*, ed. Stephan Geene (Berlin and Brooklyn: B_Books, 2000), p.167.

⁵⁵⁸ Gillian Rose, ‘Looking at Landscape: The Uneasy Pleasures of Power,’ in *Space, Gender, Knowledge: Feminist Readings*, ed. Linda McDowell and Joanne P. Sharp (London, New York, Sydney and Auckland: Arnold, 1997), p. 195.

⁵⁵⁹ Elena Dell’Agnese, ‘The US-Mexico Border in American Movies: A Political Geography Perspective,’ *Geopolitics* 10 (2006): 204.

⁵⁶⁰ Patricia L. Price, *Dry Place: Landscapes of Belonging and Exclusion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p.xxii.

⁵⁶¹ Price, *Dry Land*, pp.45-46.

difficult to settle and contains hardly any marks of human presence. Its blowing winds continuously efface such markers. In the same line of argument, geographer Joseph Nevins states that:

At the time of the U.S. annexation of the Southwest in 1848, the dominant view of the desert in the United States was that of a harsh, foreboding zone, as one of little value [...] And about the turn of the twentieth century, others began to regard the desert as a sight to master [...] ⁵⁶²

This image of the border as a tabula rasa has perhaps enabled the U.S. to rehearse its war mentality, which Jottar, as I noted in the introduction, identified.⁵⁶³ In this manner, and for several reasons, the desertic border terrain together with its accompanying representations, have become central to the tensions between Mexico and the U.S. Firstly, this geographical area used to belong to Mexico prior to 1848 and, as the members of the BAW/TAF pointed out, it is not a natural boundary. This is especially true of the Western side of the border, where Akerman filmed *From the Other Side*. Historian Rachel St John has pointed out that when the border was redrawn in 1848 it did not correspond to existing geographical features and therefore, in order to reinforce its importance, monuments, fences, amongst others, began to be avidly constructed.⁵⁶⁴

Secondly, this place is often represented as a battle zone endlessly scanned and 'protected' by military technologies. Following Jottar, it is a place that is used to rehearse war. Indeed, we look at the border through the lens of numerous military technologies such as night-vision that showcases the landscape in a variety of green homogenising hues as well as heat-sensing technologies that pinpoint moving bodies as a combination of yellows, oranges and reds immersed in a sea of cooler blues and greens. Helicopters give us an aerial view of this inhospitable if not hellish place. Even the coherence of the nation-state is often made to rest on the shoulders of effective

⁵⁶² Joseph Nevins, *Dying to Live: A Story of U.S. Immigration in an Age of Global Apartheid* (San Francisco: Open Media/City Lights Books, 2008), p. 35.

⁵⁶³ Biemann, 'Interview with Bertha Jottar,' p.167.

⁵⁶⁴ Rachel St John, *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S. Mexico Border* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), p.2.

immigration control at the border—a prime example of this is Ronald Reagan’s claim that ‘the simple truth is that we’ve lost control of our borders and no nation can do that and survive.’⁵⁶⁵ As geographer Joseph Nevins points out, this boundary was born ‘[...]via war and conquest, processes inextricably related to the making of the categories of race, class, and nation.’⁵⁶⁶

In *From the Other Side* Akerman draws attention to these views when, for instance, she shows us helicopters cruising the landscape in the night looking for migrants and shining headlights on the terrain, and then finding a group of them quickly trying to hide underneath the trees (**Plate 4.15**). Other technologies used in scanning the borderlands are also seen at the end of the film, when Akerman adds appropriated footage obtained from the Border Patrol. These include a night-vision scene shot from a helicopter as well as a hazy black and white image inscribed with target markings, both scanning the terrain and eventually find a large group of migrants (**Plate 4.16**). These images, that show how the Border Patrol obsessively look for migrants, render the landscape an arena for a kind of predatory spectator sport. These top-down aerial images differ radically from the rest of Akerman’s film that concentrates on ‘ground’ level views of the desert landscape, many taken from her car, of the kind I described at the beginning of this section. Unlike Ursula Biemann, her interest is not so much on the mobility of capital but on the moving body of the migrant and its environment. She showcases neither the bustling urban streets near the border nor the area’s nightlife. For the most part, she does not insert music. She just allows the ambient sounds—like the humming of her car’s engines—to stand out.

Biemann, who also incorporated military footage in *Performing the Border*, claims that military technologies have produced a new topography of place. These technologies, she adds, ‘[that] are used to track and monitor migration movements across the land and through border stations, are constantly producing a new visuality that enables and promotes certain notions of globality, controllability and

⁵⁶⁵ Quoted in Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on ‘Illegals’ and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), p. 84.

⁵⁶⁶ Nevins, *Dying to Live*, p. 78.

governability.⁵⁶⁷ As if counteracting the aerial and therefore emotionally distanced views of the border, Akerman emphasises dry land representations of the border.

Lastly, and in my view more urgently, is the fact that migrants are dying of environmental exposure because they are trying to cross increasingly treacherous terrain in order to get across to the U.S. Over the last couple of decades, the escalation of surveying and fencing technologies has resulted in migrants looking for less travelled but much more dangerous roads, often through the Sonoran desert. In this sense, the desert works in favour of the policing strategies of the border. As sociologist Judith Adler Hellman describes:

[...] Today [...] migrants [...] feel constrained to make their crossing attempts along new routes through the desert. Marked by extremes of heat and cold, rough terrain, and a total lack of water, the Arizona route requires those who cross to spend days walking through one of the least hospitable environments in the hemisphere. Here migrants risk death by dehydration, the bite of poisonous snakes and insects, or at the hands of bandits or vigilantes.⁵⁶⁸

In what follows I discuss how Akerman uses the landscape to try to bypass normative and detrimental ways of representing the Mexico-U.S. borderscape, as I have described it above. Additionally, I will explore the ways in which she tries to portray indirectly—via interviews and her focus on the scenery—the type of journey the migrants have to endure to go ‘to the other side.’

Topographies of Violence: Representing the Mexico-U.S. Borderscape

In this section, I will analyse Akerman’s focus on landscape arguing that she links ways of representing it to the (often violent) appropriation of land. Media professor Paul Willemsen claims that the foregrounding of landscape activates

⁵⁶⁷ Ursula Biemann, ‘Touring, Routing and Trafficking Female Geobodies: A Video Essay on the Topography of the Global Sex Trade,’ in *Mobilizing Place, Placing Mobility: The Politics of Representation in a Globalized World*, ed. Ginette Verstraete and Tim Cresswell (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), p. 84.

⁵⁶⁸ Judith Adler Hellman, *World of Mexican Migrants: The Rock and the Hard Place* (New York: The New Press, 2008), pp. 88-89.

otherwise inconspicuous cultural knowledge about a particular location. These are set in motion when landscape is represented that, in turn, can unveil certain layers of history that the discourse of film criticism frequently ignores or fails to capture.⁵⁶⁹ I will argue that in *From the Other Side*, Akerman focuses on the landscape in order to reveal some of the tribulations that migrants have to endure whilst crossing the border. I will also discuss how certain landscape representations are, as art historian W.J.T. Mitchell states, 'an instrument of cultural power.'⁵⁷⁰ As I mentioned, Akerman underlines the detrimental effects of land ownership when she declares that 'the land one possesses is always a sign of barbarism and blood.'⁵⁷¹ This section starts by contextualising Akerman's work within structuralist film, especially the work of Canadian artist and filmmaker Michael Snow who also exhibited a keen interest in landscape. It also examines how Akerman's interviewees describe the landscape and how her camera, especially the long tracking shots across the Sonoran desert, seems to respond to the adversities they describe.

Snow, as Margulies claims, was highly influential to Akerman's work.⁵⁷² Snow also paid much attention to landscape. For instance, in his three-hour film *La Région Centrale* (1971) he filmed Northern Quebec's landscape by using a remote controlled camera that could rotate 360 degrees (**Plate 4.17**). Like Akerman's *From the Other Side*, there was no voiceover and no narrative. Discussing his plans for this film he remarked that:⁵⁷³

The camera is an instrument which has expressive possibilities in itself. I want to make a gigantic landscape film equal in terms of film to the great landscape paintings of Cézanne, Poussin [...] The scene and action will be shot at different times of day and in different weather, although all in

⁵⁶⁹ Paul Willemsen, 'An Avant-Garde For the 90's,' in *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (London and Bloomington: BFI and Indiana University Press, 1994), p.156.

⁵⁷⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Introduction,' in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago and London: 1994), p.1.

⁵⁷¹ Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*, p.75.

⁵⁷² Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, p.80.

⁵⁷³ Jim Leach, 'The Landscapes of Canada's Features: Articulating Nation and Nature,' in *Cinema and Landscape*, ed. Graeme Harper and Jonathan Rayner (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2010), p. 271.

spring or summer. The film will become an absolute record of a piece of wilderness.⁵⁷⁴

Snow's work is associated with structuralist film, a genre of filmmaking to which Akerman is highly indebted.⁵⁷⁵ Structuralist film, a self-critical genre that was discussed by film critic P. Adams Sitney in 1969, had strong ties with minimalist art. For Sitney, this genre, which started in the early 1960s, is characterised by an insistence on form rather than content. It includes one or more of the following characteristics: fixed camera position, the 'flicker effect,' loop printing and rephotography of the screen.⁵⁷⁶ Artists that work under the aegis of 'structural film' privilege the formal aspects of filmmaking and emphasise real-time duration whilst sidelining narrative, which they associate with commercial cinema. Focusing on composition, surface detail and framing, structural cinema is characterised by stripping bare what the camera captures.⁵⁷⁷ As art historian A.L. Rees succinctly sums up, structuralist film places emphasis on '[...] light, time and process that [...] could create a new form of aesthetic [...] free of symbolism or narrative.'⁵⁷⁸

Edward Strickland, author of *Minimalism: Origins*, writes that both stasis and event-free narratives are characteristic of minimalist films. This has notable correspondence with structuralist films, as exemplified by Andy Warhol's static experiments with the camera.⁵⁷⁹ For example, Warhol's film *Empire* (1964), widely considered a forerunner of structuralist film, consists of a single fixed-frame real-time duration shot of the Empire State building, that allows the camera to record subtle atmospheric and light changes (**Plate 4.18**). In *From the Other Side*, Akerman places emphasis on 'light, time and process' as well as on environmental changes. This is

⁵⁷⁴ Michael Snow, 'La Région Centrale,' in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity and Contemporary Art*, ed. John O'Brian and Peter White (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), p.51.

⁵⁷⁵ Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, p.3.

⁵⁷⁶ P. Adams Sitney, 'Structural Film,' in *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.348.

⁵⁷⁷ Schmid, *Chantal Akerman*, p.21-23.

⁵⁷⁸ A.L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 81.

⁵⁷⁹ Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 7-12.

especially visible in one of the longest scenes in the film where Akerman's camera, located inside her moving car, focuses on the Mexico-U.S. border fence for a long enough time that the sun can be seen slowly descending until it disappears in the horizon and the night sets in. **(Plates 4.19 and 4.20).**

Richard Serra's *Frame*, of 1969, is an example of another film in this genre, this time created by a minimalist sculptor **(Plate 4.21)**. For this work, the artist measures a white surface, as seen through a camera's lens, with a six-inch ruler, aided by an unseen person behind the camera. Subsequently, he removes the white surface in order to reveal a window that he then also measures. Exploring the act of perception, his aim was, in Serra's words, to investigate: '[...]what the parameters were for the person who was looking through the camera, as distinct from those of the subject who was being filmed', adding that 'the size, scale and three-dimensional ambiguity of film and photographs is usually accepted as one kind of interpretation of reality.'⁵⁸⁰ In this work, the screen itself is articulated both as a window onto the world and as a tool that methodically assesses and maps the environment. As I will discuss, Akerman's film also investigates issues around scale, focusing on framing, at different distances, the border fence itself.

Akerman's works, however, although indebted and inspired by the aesthetics and methods of structuralist filmmaking, go beyond a self-reflexive exploration of the formal properties of film and into a political realm that led her to inquire into the lives of migrants crossing the Mexico-U.S. border.⁵⁸¹ Akerman has linked the process of finding what she deems to be 'the truth' to extended duration shots. Thus, she would wait '[...] for as long as necessary and truth will emerge.'⁵⁸² The long and real time duration shots of the scenery in *From the Other Side* are, for Akerman, not only there to emphasise the very act of perception but also—and here she departs from the work

⁵⁸⁰ Quoted in Annette Michelson, 'The Films of Richard Serra: An Interview,' in *Richard Serra*, ed. Hal Foster and Gordon Hughes (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2000), pp. 31-32.

⁵⁸¹ Schmid, *Chantal Akerman*, p.22.

Her work is too varied to place under one umbrella. In fact, during the 1980s Akerman produced a musical entitled the *Golden Eighties* (1986) that radically departed from her earlier stylistic markers. During the 1990s she also ventured into other genres such as a more mainstream romantic comedy, *A Couch in New York* (1996).

⁵⁸² Quoted in Schmid, *Chantal Akerman*, p.22.

of Snow and other structuralist filmmakers— a necessary component of her ‘truth’ telling process.

By focusing on the landscape, as well as by interviewing migrants, Akerman’s *From the Other Side* tries to capture the afflictions that crossing the border entails. A recurring strategy in her work as a filmmaker is re-enacting the journey that the subjects of her work have (often painfully) endured. For instance, in *South* she examines the ordeal of John Byrd, an African-American who was brutally lynched by white supremacists, and subsequently tied to a vehicle and dragged for an extended period of time until his death. For her documentary, Akerman drove and filmed from the back window of her car the journey that Byrd endured whilst tied to the vehicle. This extended duration shot is featured twice in the film. Discussing this film, Akerman commented that ‘I wanted to go there to know the price of the American miracle. I wanted to know who suffered from the most impressive economic growth in the world and also to see if the landscape could remember something other than its own beauty.’⁵⁸³ In *From the Other Side* Akerman’s camera similarly focuses on the environment that migrants traverse as if re-enacting their journeys.

From the Other Side starts with an interview of the brother of a migrant who barely survived the desert (**Plate 4.22**). He claims that his brother almost lost his life crossing the border because he was abandoned by his coyote in the middle of the desert along with a large group of migrants. Disorientated, after five days struggling to survive in scorching heat, most of his fellow migrants in the group tragically lost their lives. A different interview, with 78-year-old Delfina Maruri Miranda, underlines the environmental conditions to which migrants are subject (**Plate 4.23**). Akerman asks her about her deceased son Raymundo and her grandson who, she heard, also passed away. Instead of discussing their death, Delfina tells Akerman about her son and how he was very enthusiastic about people and his community. Raymundo was always pressing the ‘town elders’ to fix the roof of the local school. Strong winds during March and February often blow the roofs off of houses so the town was in need of many refurbishments. To make things worse, earthquakes also often demolish

⁵⁸³ Quoted in Claudia Schmuckli, ‘South (Sud),’ in *Chantal Akerman: Moving Through Time and Space*, ed. Terrie Sultan (Seattle: Marquand Books, Inc, 2008), p. 20

buildings and houses. When Akerman asks Delfina about her son's plans to go 'to the North', Delfina avoids the question and instead continues telling her about the plans Raymundo had for building new places for his village. At the end of the interview, Delfina starts crying and stares blankly at the floor. In the interview that follows, we learn from her husband that their son left on the 15th of March in order to cross the border. A few days later they found out that he had died in this crossing. As if to reinforce the treacherousness of this terrain and give us an idea of Raymundo's journey, Akerman then shows us a long duration shot of two people walking in the desert at the distance, in what is surely an almost unbearable heat (**Plate 4.24**). Seen at this distance and for this amount of time, these figures look dwarfed by the landscape and their efforts to traverse it seem minuscule, even futile.

Once more highlighting some of the environmental adversities the migrants face, more than halfway through the film, Akerman interviews a Mexican official working at the consulate in Douglas whose occupation it is to protect the rights of border crossers. He claims that as traditional crossings such as Tijuana-San Diego become increasingly militarised, migrants choose to traverse through much more dangerous terrains, like the Sonoran desert. In fact, prior to Operation Gatekeeper signed by Bill Clinton in 1994, that advanced the fortification of the border, migrant deaths from environmental factors were extremely rare.⁵⁸⁴ In a dramatic shift, it is estimated that during the period of 1999-2009 around 1800 people lost their lives crossing to 'the other side.'⁵⁸⁵ These, unfortunately, are underestimates: they rely on the corpses found and subsequently catalogued by the Border Patrol and the Mexican consulate and therefore do *not* count those remains that were not found.⁵⁸⁶ Around midway through the film, Akerman shows a still but long duration scene that hones in on a sign that reads 'Dead End'—paradoxically, in the middle of the vast open desert—that is quivering from violent dusty winds (**Plate 4.25**). In this way, the sign functions as a reminder of the ultimate risk involved in crossing the border via the Sonoran desert.

⁵⁸⁴ Ken Ellingwood, *Hard Line: Life and Death on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (New York: Vintange Books, 2005), pp. 57-58.

⁵⁸⁵ Jeremy Harding, *Border Vigils: Keeping Migrants out of the Rich World* (London: Verso, 2012), p.99.

⁵⁸⁶ Adler Hellman, *World of Mexican Migrants*, p. 91.

To be sure, migrants crossing the border do not only have to avoid the Border Patrol but also the scorching temperatures in the daylight, plunging temperatures in the evening, and lack of water, food and shelter. They also have to face coyotes—as the migrant’s brother narrated—that betray, steal and leave them to their own devices often disorientated, in the middle of the desert. Returning to the Mexican official, he claims that one of the hardest things he has to do, whilst choking up, is to call the families of migrants who died in the crossing. Indeed, he confirms that the increasing militarisation of the border has meant that migrants opt for more dangerous routes inevitably resulting in more deaths.⁵⁸⁷ In this way, the bodies of migrants are rendered disposable by a nation-state that, although not directly involved in their death, creates the conditions under which their death occurs. The situation that the Mexican consul describes tallies with feminist philosopher Judith Butler’s notion of ‘ungrievable lives.’ In her book *Precarious Life* she states:

Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives might not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as ‘grievable.’⁵⁸⁸

Again accenting the precariousness of these lives, later in the film Akerman conducts an interview with the sheriff of Douglas who, discussing the increased border security in Arizona, maintains that Doris Meissner, a former commissioner to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), recognised that ‘she blew it’ when she recommended expanding the militarisation of the border, since it ultimately resulted in more human casualties.⁵⁸⁹ Although she originally thought that it would deter migrants, this did not happen, admits the official. Crystallising the mechanisms of systemic violence at work in the Mexico-U.S. border he continues:

⁵⁸⁷ Harding, *Border Vigils*, pp. 89-90.

⁵⁸⁸ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), p. 32.

⁵⁸⁹ Dennis Wepman, *Immigration* (American Experience) (New York: Facts on File, 2008), p.316.

The large increase in deaths of the migrants [...] was a calculated consequence. It might not have been a planned consequence as such, although I think it probably was [...] but it was certainly an anticipated consequence of this action.

In this way, the topography of this area exerts a violence on the body of the migrant—whether a ‘planned consequence’ or not—in the form of exhaustion, dehydration and exposure. This is, in my view, what Akerman meant when she claimed that possessing land leads to bloodshed. Securing borders comes at the expense of protecting the lives of migrants. After the interview with the sheriff, there is again a long duration scene of the landscape from the window of her car. One can only imagine what it is like to cross this treacherous land on foot.

Embodied Wanderings: Extended Duration and Landscape

For this section, I will embed Akerman’s work within the art and film practices of the 1960s and 1970s since they elucidate her concerns with space and landscape. I will draw on academics that have written from a phenomenological standpoint, including those that have investigated the embodied experience of landscape. By looking at her work in relation to minimalism as it developed both in sculpture and film, I will place Akerman’s works within the genealogy of site-oriented practices.

Kwon places minimalist practices at the start of her genealogy of site-specificity since they underlined that the ‘space of art’ was not ‘a blank slate.’⁵⁹⁰ In ‘The Artist as Ethnographer,’ Foster also places minimalism within a similar genealogy asserting that:

The ethnographic turn in contemporary art is also driven by developments within the minimalist genealogy of art over the last thirty-five years. These developments constitute a sequence of investigations: first of the material constituents of the art medium, then its spatial conditions of perception, and then of the corporeal bases of this perception—shifts marked in

⁵⁹⁰ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p.11.

minimalist art in the early 1960s through conceptual, performance, body, and site-specific art in the early 1970s.⁵⁹¹

As I elaborated on the previous section, *From the Other Side* foregrounds 'the spatial conditions of perception' as well as the lack of neutrality of the landscape and the way it powerfully plays into our geopolitical imaginaries. Landscape, Akerman's film reveals, is far from a tabula rasa. As such, it seems fitting to include a work that is related to minimalist practices in a dissertation focused on site oriented-practices. Minimalism's concern with the place in which the work was situated in opened up innovative lines of enquiry into other various ideologically inscribed spaces including, as in the case of Akerman, landscapes.

Like minimalist practices, Akerman's work also explores the relationship between subject, object and space and can be productively read from a phenomenological perspective. Explaining her long duration shots, Akerman has claimed:

Time is not only in the shot, it is also in the spectators who are looking at the shot. *They feel this time, in their own bodies*. Even if they claim to be bored[...]To wait for the next shot is also already to feel oneself living, to feel oneself existing [my emphasis].⁵⁹²

Akerman's statement above on 'feeling the time' seems to elicit a phenomenological reading of her work. Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his seminal book *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) was highly influential to minimalist practitioners. In this work Merleau-Ponty notably remarks that an object is '[...] inseparable from a person perceiving it'⁵⁹³ and, in a different text, he maintains that he does not see space '[...] according to an exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is all around me, not in front of me.'⁵⁹⁴ Echoing

⁵⁹¹ Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' p.184.

⁵⁹² Quoted in Schmid, *Chantal Akerman*, p. 21.

⁵⁹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 373.

⁵⁹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie and trans. William Cobb (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p.179.

his writings, minimalist artist Robert Morris (1966) in his important 'Notes on Sculpture' claims that 'The object has not become less important. It has merely become less *self*-important,'⁵⁹⁵ also underlining the interaction between viewer, object and space. For Kwon, minimalism witnessed a '[...]restructuring of the subject from an old Cartesian model to a phenomenological one of lived bodily experience' and 'returned the viewing subject a physical body.'⁵⁹⁶ In Akerman's film practices, the 'old Cartesian model' is displaced by a corporeal experience on the part of the viewer that is elicited by her long duration shots.

Turning to the relationship between minimalism and moving images, film academic Juan A. Suárez points out that structural film's '[...] most immediate parallel in the art world was minimalism, itself an art of process, nonreferential, self-reflexive, and concerned with the way its (non) objects inhabited space and time [...]'⁵⁹⁷ Similarly, cinema expert David E. James has noted that structural film and minimalist art of the 1960s shared an insistence on materiality, focus on form rather than content, the structural relationship between modular parts and the whole and actively resisted consumerist society.⁵⁹⁸ Edward Strickland, author of *Minimalism: Origins*, has written that stasis and event-free narrative are characteristic of minimalist films exemplified by Andy Warhol's static experiments with the camera.⁵⁹⁹ In like manner, art historian Pamela M. Lee writes that Warhol's films can be considered the 'cinematic equivalent of minimalism.'⁶⁰⁰ As I mentioned in the previous section, Warhol's *Empire* (1964) consisted of a single, fixed-frame, real-time duration shot of the Empire State building, allowing the camera to record subtle atmospheric and light changes. On Warhol's films like *Empire*, Lee observes that: '[...] are one and the same

⁵⁹⁵ Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture,' in *Minimalist Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p.234.

⁵⁹⁶ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, pp.12-13.

⁵⁹⁷ Juan A. Suárez, 'Structural Film: Noise,' in *Still Moving: Between Cinema And Photography*, ed. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p.64.

⁵⁹⁸ David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 240-241.

⁵⁹⁹ Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 7-12.

⁶⁰⁰ Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2004), p.279.

time both *representation* and *experience* of duration, both subject and object.’⁶⁰¹ This emphasis in the symbiotic relationship between representation and experience is also present in Akerman’s film. Although she does not apply stasis to the same extreme that Warhol does—in addition to her static shots she often films from her moving car—the extended duration shot of the Mexico-U.S. border fence, where we see the sun descending until it disappears in the horizon, also records atmospheric and light changes in an attempt to make the observer, in Akerman’s words, ‘feel this time, in their own bodies.’⁶⁰²

Since the early 1990s, Akerman has developed multi-screen installations—including both *From the Other Side* and *From the East*—adding another valence to her phenomenological engagement with space, absent in the work that she produced in the 1970s. This lends itself particularly well to a phenomenologist reading since, as art historian Chrissie Iles claims, multi-screen installations choreograph a complex assemblage between the screen, the surrounding space and the embodied presence of the viewer:

The spectator’s attention turns from the illusion on the screen to the surrounding space, and to the physical mechanisms and properties of the moving image [...] the transparency and illusionism of the screen, the internal structure of the film frame, the camera as an extension of the body’s own mental and ocular recording system [...] and the interlocking structure of multiple video images.’⁶⁰³

In a similar vein, film professor Margaret Morse has also written about the general significance of the interactive viewing conditions created by video installations. She notices that the visitor is situated in a spatial ‘here and now’ within a framework that is in the actual, rather than illusionistic, space.⁶⁰⁴ According to Morse, in a video installation, the movement of the viewer who wanders through given spaces alters the

⁶⁰¹ Lee, *Chronophobia*, p.80.

⁶⁰² Quoted in Schmid, *Chantal Akerman*, p. 21.

⁶⁰³ Chrissie Iles, ‘Between the Still and the Moving Image,’ in *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977*, ed. Chrissie Iles (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001), p.34.

⁶⁰⁴ Margaret Morse, ‘Video Installation Art: The Body, the Image, and the Space-in-Between,’ in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer (London: Aperture, 1990), p. 156.

sound and lighting distribution of the room. Multi-screen projections allow for the viewing of 'co-present worlds.' Video installations, she continues, 'unfold' in time since the viewer needs to traverse the space of the installation.⁶⁰⁵ In a similar note, art historian Ursula Frohne writes that video installation ensembles:

[...] ultimately dissolves the classical order of the auditorium in which viewers sit still, watching what is happening on the screen, and replaces it with an all-embracing, almost tactile scenario in which the performative involvement of the viewer is a given from the moment he or she enters the room.⁶⁰⁶

In the tripartite installation of *From the Other Side*—first exhibited in Kassel, Germany, for Documenta XI in 2002—Akerman showed in the first room the last part of the film, that consists of Akerman driving through a motorway in L.A. (**Plate 4.26**). The next room showed eighteen monitors displaying various sections of the film (**Plate 4.27**).⁶⁰⁷ For the third section—which appeared in a gallery in Paris a year after the film was first shown in Kassel—she created a different installation entitled *Une Voix Dans Le Desert* that consisted of footage that she had already filmed but had not shown in Kassel. For this, Akerman filmed a very large screen erected on the Mexican-American desert—between two mountains, one on each side of the border—showing the end sections of *From the Other Side*, including the archival scenes of migrants crossing the border, taken from the U.S. Border Patrol surveillance camera, and the last scene of the film where she is driving on a motorway towards L.A. (**Plate 4.28**). Thus, *Une Voix Dans Le Desert* created a screen-within-a-screen—a feature typical of structural film, according to Sitney. She filmed the screen throughout the day in the open desert air, recording the passage of time as dawn encroached, changing the colour contrasts and the luminosity of the in-situ screen itself.⁶⁰⁸ In this way she

⁶⁰⁵ Morse, 'Video Installation Art,' p. 166.

⁶⁰⁶ Ursula Frohne, 'Dissolution of the Frame: Immersion and Participation in Video Installations,' in *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton, trans. Ishbel Flett (London: Tate Publishing in Association with Afterall, 2008), p.369.

⁶⁰⁷ Kaira Cabañas, 'Chantal Akerman: Centre Georges Pompidou Paris April 28-June 7,' in *Parachute: Contemporary Art Magazine*, online version, 2004. <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-123202243.html>. Date accessed: 30th of October 2012.

⁶⁰⁸ Schmid, *Chantal Akerman*, pp.119-120.

highlighted, on the one hand, the desertic environment; and on the other, self-reflexively, her filming of it. By both creating an installation out of *From the Other Side* and filming an in situ screen in *Une Voix Dans Le Desert*, Akerman self-reflexively created an intentional dialogue between a multitude of virtual and actual sites in order to address the border, thereby demonstrating a sophisticated and multi-layered engagement with site. If Biemann, as I argued in the previous chapter, investigated space by superimposing and editing varied image flows into her digital video-essay Akerman, instead, examined the border through her installations that deconstructed landscapes of the border for the contemplation of the embodied viewer.

This installation in Kassel encouraged the observers—also participants since their interaction is, like Morse argued, woven into the artwork itself—to wander across scenes that feature the desertic landscape, attempting to draw their attention to the journeys migrants have to face to get to the other side. This focus on the environment is underlined in two ways: by the long duration shots of the landscape in *From the Other Side* and, in *Une Voix Dans Le Desert*, by showing us the screen within the landscape itself. These landscape scenes, in my view, are integral to a viewing experience that attempts to represent the journeys of migrants.

Anthropologist Christopher Tilley describes the kind of phenomenological knowledge that Akerman evokes in her long duration shots of the landscape:

[...]Knowledge of landscapes, either past or present, is gained through perceptual experience of them from the point of view of the subject [...]A phenomenologist's experience of landscape is one that takes place through the medium of his or her sensing and sensed carnal body. It involves participant observation, which means being a part of what one is attempting to describe and to understand [...] A phenomenological study takes time. ... *[T]he longer one experiences a landscape the more that will be understood* [...] Places alter according to natural rhythms such as the progression of the seasons, time of the day, qualities of light and shade [my emphasis].⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰⁹ Christopher Tilley, *Interpreting Landscapes: Geologies, Topographies, Identities* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2010), pp.25-26.

Indeed, *From the Other Side* carefully records the subtle variations of light and shade and the nocturnal and diurnal transitions of the Sonoran desert. Tilley's argument that a phenomenological study of landscape 'takes time' resonates strongly with Akerman's own explanation for her use of long duration shots. Since it is the same methodology that ethnographers employ, it is worth underlining that Tilley used the words 'participant observation' to describe an embodied experience of landscape. Earlier I mentioned that Akerman's visual inquiries not only applied to the citizens of particular locations like New York and the Mexico U.S. border but also, more broadly, as in the case of *Jeanne Dielman*, to the mundane details of everyday life like household chores. Akerman's ethnographic sensibility is also evident in her engagement with landscapes. As I will discuss in the next section, Akerman's tries to disentangle her film from normative ways of representing a territory by depicting a 'smooth' space as theorised by Deleuze and Guattari. Instead of relying on schematic representations of land, she attempts to understand this landscape corporeally, in a similar way that Tilley describes.

A Disoriented World: Traversing Smooth Terrain

Discussing *From the East*, Akerman says that the film 'will let one perceive something of this *disoriented world*' (my emphasis).⁶¹⁰ However, she never expands on this outlook, one that is stripped of geographical bearings. Perhaps she had in mind the radical geopolitical changes that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. But in this section, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between smooth and striated space, I will argue instead that this pervasive sense of disorientation is deeply enmeshed with Akerman's own nomadic sensibility. As I will expand on, in both *From the East* and *From the Other Side* Akerman creates a sense of 'lostness' by refusing to let viewers know where they are or even what particular country they are in.

⁶¹⁰ Quoted in Margulies, *Nothing Happens*, p.199.

Disorientation is one of the most dangerous things for a migrant.⁶¹¹ As if trying to parallel this in her film, *From the Other Side* Akerman induces a sense of confusion—she often does not tell us what side of the border she is in or where she is heading. Additionally, even though all the titles of her tetralogy denote a direction, none of them refer to the country or the geographical area that Akerman is visiting. Around halfway through the film, the extended tracking shot of the border fence, where the sun can be seen slowly descending over the horizon, indicates that she is about to cross to the other side. But, just as the immigration checkpoints are shown in the distance and we try to create a mental map of Akerman's journey, she makes a surprising turn—a decision which remains stubbornly unexplained throughout the film and in her writings—that takes her instead to a small town in Mexico that neighbours the official borderline, where the camera lingers on for a substantial period of time on the facades of the shops (**Plate 4.29**). After this she presents an image of a fence—whether it is the Mexico-U.S. border or not it is never made clear—and then comes the long duration shot of the 'Dead End' sign I mentioned earlier (**Plate 4.25**). It is the sign written in English, rather than any information that Akerman provides, that lets us know that she has crossed over.

Even more confusingly, at the end of the film we learn through the only voiceover in the film that Akerman is driving through a motorway towards Los Angeles, indicated by some visible road signs. But this is over 600 miles away from Douglas, Arizona, requiring approximately a ten-hour drive—that, again, leaves her trip with another inexplicable lacuna and forecloses the possibility of creating a 'mental map' of her journey. Philosopher Edward S. Casey defines a mental map as a 'schematic representation of a place in the form of a set of features that, were they to

⁶¹¹ In fact, the artist collectives Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0 (EDT) and b.a.n.g. lab, with the assistance of The California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology in San Diego, created in 2007 a GPS-enabled mobile phone in order to assist migrants crossing the border. The potentially life-saving device not only helped orientate migrants but also pointed to water points. [Marcela A. Fuentes, 'Zooming In and Out: Tactical Media Performance in Transnational Contexts,' in *Performance, Politics and Activism*, ed. Peter Lichtenfels and John Rouse (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 32-33.]

become explicit, would constitute a diagram of that place; for the most part, these features are implicitly held in mind.’⁶¹²

The image of a fence recurs throughout the film, often confusing the viewer as to whether the barrier is there for a purpose other than to divide the two countries. For instance, there are several long duration shots that are framed by a cement wall, leaving the viewer wondering as to its purpose—do people live so close to the borderline or is it a residential wall to safely enclose the neighbourhood **(Plate 4.11)**? A different scene shows an image of an ordinary fence, the first part of which is made out of concrete, followed by a section of metal panels until it stops abruptly with only a few wooden poles that mark its probable continuation, allowing the viewer a glimpse of the other side **(Plate 4.6)**. Even special attention is paid to the mostly flimsy fences that surround the houses, which can scarcely if at all ward off intruders **(Plates 4.7)**. Another scene shows the vast open desert landscape where a long barrier can be seen at a distance **(Plate 4.3)**. MacDonald asked Akerman in an interview if this was the border itself and Akerman replied that it was, although most people had failed to notice it as it was almost seamlessly embedded in the desert terrain.⁶¹³ We see the fence from a wide variety of viewpoints and therefore in a myriad of scales that emphasise its sheer physicality, its symbolic importance and its mundane function. Both the close-ups and the distanced views of the fence draw attention to how the camera can alter our perception of scale—not unlike Serra’s aforementioned film.

Almost ironically, since Akerman’s entire feature length documentary describes a directional flow, there is a sense of spatial disorientation that frustrates any attempt to create a mental map of her journey. Although the border wall is the most visible and recognisable geographical anchor in *From the Other Side*, many other walls are also shown during her journey across the Mexico-U.S. borderlands, which keeps the viewer guessing as to which is which. The lack of geographical markers is also present in her earlier films—*News From Home*, for example, is devoid of any

⁶¹² Edward S. Casey, *The World at a Glance* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp.89-91.

⁶¹³ MacDonald, 'Chantal Akerman,' p. 269.

recognisable locations even though, needless to say, New York City contains multiple iconic sites. Likewise, in *From the East* the viewer is left in the dark as to what country Akerman is located at a given time, leaving the viewer only with a vague sense of direction that is manifestly indicated by the title of the film.

A precedent for phenomenological engagements with landscapes and temporality in the context of the 1960s and 1970s can be found in the work of Robert Smithson who, like Akerman, also hinged his work on different landscapes and the experience of geographical sites. After tracing the genealogy of site-specific practices to minimalism, in 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' Foster claims that Smithson, amongst others, '[...] transformed the siting of art dramatically.'⁶¹⁴ For Kwon, Smithson's work contributed to extract the work of art from the museum and gallery space.⁶¹⁵ Kwon claimed that '[...] informed by the contextual thinking of minimalism,' Smithson, amongst others 'conceived [of] the site not only in physical and spatial terms but as a *cultural* framework[...].'⁶¹⁶ In fact, James Meyer uses Smithson's work as a paradigmatic example of the functional site since: 'Place, for Smithson, is a vectored relation: the physical site is a destination to be seen or left behind, a "tour" recalled through snapshots and travelogues [...].'⁶¹⁷ The process of traveling and creating travelogues is a crucial component of both Smithson and Akerman's practice.

Smithson's famous earthwork *Spiral Jetty* (1970) consists of an enormous coil that marks Utah's Great Salt Lake and was made out of the landscape's very own materials (**Plate 4.30**).⁶¹⁸ Then Smithson created a film of the same name that, according to art historian Andrew V. Uroskie, generated a sense of disorientation. After opening the film with a shot of the sun, we can see Smithson traveling down the road whilst the ticking of a clock, emphasising duration, can be heard in the

⁶¹⁴ Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' p.185.

⁶¹⁵ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p.26.

⁶¹⁶ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p. 13.

⁶¹⁷ James Meyer, 'The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity,' in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p.30.

⁶¹⁸ Ron Graziani, *Robert Smithson and the American Landscape* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p.80.

background.⁶¹⁹ Discussing the influence of structuralist filmmakers on Smithson, Uroskie points out that '[...] these images of the road are almost completely devoid of information [...] It is precisely this barrenness that allows them to function as direct images of time [...There is a] brute phenomenological insistence of time passing.'⁶²⁰ In both *From the Other Side* and *From the East*, Akerman not only also places emphasis on duration but similarly refuses to locate us 'unambiguously in space,' to use Uroskie's words.⁶²¹ At the end of the film Smithson shoots footage of the earthwork *Spiral Jetty* from an ascending helicopter. Whilst this is happening, in a voiceover he claims:

From the centre of the Spiral Jetty:
 North—Mud, salt, crystals, rocks, water.
 North by East—Mud, salt, crystals, rocks, water.
 Northeast by North—Mud, salt, crystals, rocks, water.
 Northeast by East—Mud, salt, crystals, rocks, water.
 East by North—Mud, salt, crystals, rocks, water.
 East—Mud, salt, crystals, rocks, water [...] ⁶²²

Entirely bypassing traditional cartographic norms, as this voiceover reflects, this set of coordinates refuse to locate the work in space, much like Akerman does in her film. Initially, the footage shot from the ascending helicopter does not record the *Spiral Jetty* in its entirety, as would be expected from an aerial perspective. Rather, Smithson films fragments of it masking its very identity. We have to wait until the end of the film for a complete picture to emerge. When we finally see the *Spiral Jetty* in its entirety, Smithson draws attention to the relationship between his body and the work as he is seen running down the earthwork. This parallels Akerman's treatment of the fences in *From the Other Side*, as she cloaks their identity by confusing the viewer as to whether the object viewed is the official Mexico-U.S. divide or merely quotidian wall.

⁶¹⁹ Andrew V. Uroskie, 'La Jetée en Spirale: Robert Smithson's Stratigraphic Cinema,' *Grey Room* 19 (2006): 64

⁶²⁰ Uroskie, 'La Jetée,' p.67.

⁶²¹ Uroskie, 'La Jetée,' p.69.

⁶²² Quoted in Uroskie, 'La Jetée,' p.71.

Returning to Akerman's films, this sense of disorientation is an attempt to represent a 'smooth space' in Deleuze and Guattari's sense. In *A Thousand Plateaus* the philosophers make a useful distinction between smooth and striated space: the former belongs to the nomad whereas the latter denotes sedentarism. Striated spaces are metric, measured or otherwise quantified and, in their words, 'closes off a surface and "allocates" it according to determinate intervals, assigned breaks.'⁶²³ In addition, 'One of the fundamental tasks of the state is to striate the space over which it reigns.'⁶²⁴ Imposing order—like, for instance, in a map—would be a means of striating a space. Indirectly, art historian Irit Rogoff has defined cartography in a way that relates to the notion of a striated space. For her, cartography is '[...] the signifying practice of both location and identity, a mode of writing through which we can uncover a *set of general laws*' (my emphasis).⁶²⁵ Maps, according to Rogoff, through their careful encoding and Cartesian measurements, define and therefore *make* property.

Another example of striated space would be the diagrammatic markings found on the playing ground of certain sports like basketball or football. To elaborate, in Akerman's film this striating is visible when she shows two long duration scenes of children playing sports—both baseball and football—which are immediately followed by footage showcasing a fence (**Plate 4.31**). Andreas, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, claims that a sport's metaphor is often used to describe the situation of the border:

[...] the game metaphor also draws attention to the strategic interaction between border enforcers and illegal border crossers. It provides a healthy antidote to the metaphors of war and natural disaster [...] more commonly used to characterize the problems of immigration and drug control.⁶²⁶

Both baseball and football involve, of course, moving in a diagrammatic space, with its own set of predetermined tracings, and obeying 'general laws'—much like the

⁶²³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 479.

⁶²⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.385.

⁶²⁵ Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 73.

⁶²⁶ Andreas, *Border Games*, p. xiv.

striated space of a map. In fact, there are a few examples of artists that have chosen to engage with the often harrying and draconian policing of the Mexico-U.S. border by hosting a sporting event meant to create a different and more amicable paradigm of conviviality. For example, in 2000, Mexican artist Gustavo Artigas made *The Rules of the Game* in Tijuana, which hosted a basketball game. The teams were divided by place of residence: one represented Tijuana, the other San Diego.⁶²⁷ These games involve thinking about the position individuals have in a complex network of power relations.

Her quest for transforming striated into smooth spaces is, I would argue, what leads Akerman not only to draw a connection between land and bloodshed, but also to refuse naming and identifying the places that she visits. Landscape architecture academics Matthew Potteiger and Jamie Purinton argue that:

In the narratives of exploration, naming is critical for exercising the rights of discovery. In America, the various colonial powers waged a veritable naming war, competing to be the first to name, or asserting newly acquired power by renaming what had already been claimed by another.⁶²⁸

Naming land then, according to these academics, carries with it colonial undertones. Not dissimilarly, political scientist Stuart Elden draws a connection between violence and territory:

⁶²⁷ Cuauhtémoc Medina, 'Juegos Intersubjetivos en el Campo Político,' in *La Imágen Política: XXV Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte*, ed. Cuauhtémoc Medina (San Luis Potosí: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2006), p. 569.

The examples of engaging in the political situation in the borderlands with game strategies and rules are numerous. Coco Fusco created an online monopoly game based in a border theme that can still be accessed in the artists' webpage. [For more information see <http://www.thing.net/~cocofusco/work.htm>, Date accessed: 12th of November 2012]. In a similar note but in a different location, American architect Lebbeus Woods, in his article entitled 'The Wall Game', discusses a hypothetical situation whereby the current West Bank wall could, instead of functioning as a technology of containment, employ numerous artists, builders and architects on both sides of the border in order to build 'cantilevered constructions', i.e. constructions anchored on the wall that did not touch the floor. Since they are cantilevered, both teams have to work together in order to stabilize the structure. As such, there are no 'winners' in this game. [For more information see Lebbeus Wood, 'The Wall game,' in *Against the Wall: Israel's Barrier to Peace*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York and London: The New Press, 2005), pp.260-265.

⁶²⁸ Matthew Potteiger and Jamie Purinton, *Landscape Narratives: Design Practices for Telling Stories* (New York, Chichester, Weinheim, Brisbane, Singapore and Toronto: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998), p.83.

Creating a bounded space is already a violent act of exclusion and inclusion; maintaining it as such requires constant vigilance and the mobilization of threat [...] States are territorial, certainly, but the territorial aspect is not a mere container for state action. The control of territory is what makes a state possible. Thus, control of territory accords a specific legitimacy to the violence and determines its spatial extent[...] To control territory is to exercise terror.⁶²⁹

This dovetails with the fact that, as I mentioned at the start of this chapter, the words terror and territory share a common etymological origin: 'territory' comes from the Latin root *terrere* that means to both terrorise and exclude.⁶³⁰

On the contrary, a smooth space is the space of the nomad a 'field without conduits or channels.'⁶³¹ Akerman herself has previously identified with the figure of the nomad stating that: '[The way] I would like to film [...] corresponds to a certain wishful thinking on my part about nomadism[...] as well as the idea that the land one possesses is always a sign of barbarism and blood.'⁶³² Here, I am not conflating Akerman's own nomadic experience with the journey that migrants undertake under very harsh conditions, unlike her own journey. Rather, I am claiming that the way she investigates the landscape and the lives of those who inhabit the borderlands relies on her own nomadic experience. Making a distinction between a nomad and a migrant, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari assert that, for the latter:

A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own [...] The nomad is not at all the same as the migrant; for the migrant goes principally from one point to another [...]⁶³³

Deserts are the paradigmatic space of the nomad since, according to Deleuze and Guattari, 'there is no line separating earth and sky; there is no intermediate distance;

⁶²⁹ Stuart Elden, *Terror and Territory: The Spatial Extent of Sovereignty* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. xxx.

⁶³⁰ Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, p. xxiii.

⁶³¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 369.

⁶³² From an unpublished text quoted in Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York: Verso, 2002), p.75.

⁶³³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 1987), p.380

no perspective or contour; visibility is limited.’⁶³⁴ For them: ‘[...] orientations, landmarks, and linkages are in continuous variation [...] Examples are the desert [...] and sea [...] Orientations are not constant [...] There is no visual model for points of reference’⁶³⁵ In the desert, as shown in Akerman’s film, marks are blown away by the wind. The smooth space of the nomad is one without fixed patterns, an open surface for a hypermobile existence.

Biemann has articulated a similar concept of space as Akerman. Drawing on the theories of philosopher and political scientist Achille Mbembe, Biemann argues that with the development of ‘[...]scientific surveying equipment, Western notions of space had become increasingly mechanistic and absolute while those people who did without such gadgetry conceived of it in terms of social relations [...] time and effort.’⁶³⁶ In Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology, this ‘gadgetry’ transformed previously smooth space into striated space. Biemann explains that, according to Mbembe, in pre-colonial times the concept of land was entirely relational and political bodies often existed free from the shackles of cartographical borders. ‘Pre-colonial territoriality,’ claims Biemann ‘was an itinerant territoriality, able to mutate in size.’

⁶³⁷

Following this line of argument, in *From the Other Side* Akerman tries to articulate a space free from colonial and neo-colonial inscriptions, a nomadic space unconfined by oppressive cartographical practices. She captures with her camera a corporeal relationship between the viewer and the landscape. Casey, who has written extensively about the relationship between body and territory, proposed a way of looking at the land that entails ‘[...]showing how it feels and looks to be on or in the land.’⁶³⁸ This is what Akerman films do—by emphasising the bodily relation between

⁶³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 382.

⁶³⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 493.

⁶³⁶ Ursula Biemann, ‘Agadez Chronicle: Post-Colonial Politics of Space and Mobility in the Sahara,’ in *The Maghreb Connection: Movements of Life Across North Africa*, ed. Ursula Biemann and Brian Holmes (Barcelona: Actar, 2006), p.51.

⁶³⁷ Biemann, ‘Agadez Chronicle,’ p.51.

⁶³⁸ Edward S. Casey, *Earth-Mapping: Artists Reshaping Landscape* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p.xvi.

viewer and landscape Akerman offers a novel way of relating to land, one that is outside the straightjacket of nationhood and the bloodshed that it entails.

Conclusion

From an ethnographic perspective, Akerman investigates the lack of neutrality of landscape and the violence that appropriating land entails. Her work is not entirely free from ideological patronage that characterises some ethnographic practices. The fact that she claimed that she went to the Mexico-U.S. border in order to have a 'sense of adventure' is problematic and echoes strongly with a neo-colonialist attitude that exoticizes the 'other' for entertainment purposes. Yet her ethnographic mode of working is not only characteristic of the travelogues that she started making during the 1990s but also of her earlier fiction films, like *Jeanne Dielman*, filmed in the country of her birth. The objectifying way in which she films people and landscape remains the same throughout her travelogues. It is almost as if she makes little distinction between the people and the landscape that they inhabit.

Although all of this does not justify her comment, it does illustrate that the manner in which she films *From the Other Side* is no different to that of a fiction film that consists simply of observing a woman doing household chores. Her comment should also not detract from the valuable observations she does make in relation to the link between violence and territory and the way that she develops a sophisticated spatial politics through aesthetic and formal means. Since there is no voiceover, no overarching narrative or argument, no clear or salient political voice, no use shock tactics, her work stands heavily at odds in this dissertation for its neoformalist take on the Mexico-U.S. borderlands. However, by looking closely at her work and the strategies she employs, unpacking the way that she films the landscape, paying attention to what her interviewees argue, and situating her work within site-oriented practices, her work does get to the main source of violence that characterises the borderlands: marking out territory is itself an act of violence.

Chapter Five

The Politics of Mourning and Remembrance in the Work of Teresa Margolles: Representing Violence at the Mexico-U.S. Border

Today, any analysis of the social, political and economic fabric of the Mexico-U.S. border would be incomplete without a discussion of the violence that has gripped the region and has taken conspicuous if not sensationalist hold of both national and international headlines. In this chapter I will address those artists that have focused their attentions on the current violent state of affairs in the region, concentrating on the artworks of Mexican artist Teresa Margolles. Margolles' works differ from the other artists that I have analysed in *Geographies of Violence* in the sense that she is less concerned with spatial politics than the other artists that I have discussed. I have chosen to engage with her works because she is very directly preoccupied with the mechanisms of violence and the way they operate along the Mexico-U.S. border. Given the recent turn of events in the advent of the 'drug war,' it would have been an oversight not to include the work of an artist that engages with the violence of the Mexico-U.S. border.

In addition, her artistic practices, like the others that I have discussed throughout, can still be placed within the genealogy of site-oriented practices and the ethnographic turn. The 'site' in Margolles work is not so much the Mexico-U.S. border as such or the way the nation-state wields its power but more the spaces where violent events occurred. As Hal Foster maintained in 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' one of the trends that characterised this turn was that '[...] many artists and critics treat conditions like desire or disease, AIDS or homelessness, as sites of art.'⁶³⁹ Similarly, Miwon Kwon claims that '[...] a dominant drive of site oriented practices [...] is the pursuit of a more intense engagement with the outside world and everyday

⁶³⁹ Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 184.

life.’⁶⁴⁰ Margolles treats the violence that characterises contemporary life in Mexico, including the border, as her primary ‘site’ for art.

I will start this chapter with an extensive discussion of both the violence perpetrated by the drug cartels as well as the one suffered by women working in maquiladoras, returning to the work of Ursula Biemann. I will analyse this violence through the lens of Slavoj Žižek’s writings on ‘systemic violence’, together with the ethical and practical problems of representing and documenting violence at the borderlands. Key to this discussion is how to represent violence outside normative journalistic practices—that, as I will discuss, have been deeply compromised by both the drug cartels and governmental bodies—and more importantly, how these artists try to shed light on the underlying causes of violence that, at the very least, attempt to avoid the pitfalls of sensationalist and voyeuristic fascination so often induced by violent imagery. Indeed, one of my central aims in this chapter is to think about ways of representing violence in a manner that does not fall prey to the numbing effects so often facilitated by mass media and journalistic coverage. Because of this, I will return to Ursula Biemann’s *Performing the Border* especially in relation to the femicide that has occurred in Ciudad Juárez.

I will historically contextualise Margolles’ works within artistic practices of the 1960s and 1970s predominantly in Northern Europe, focusing in particular on the discursive and symbolic role of the materials she employs. I will then consider how her use of materials can be analysed in relation to the notion of the ‘trace’ that, amongst others, has been amply articulated by art historian Mieke Bal and film expert Mary Ann Doane. I will question how these artists attempt to represent collective suffering without resorting to a process that de-individualises and victimises the bearers of violence whilst at the same time considering how the logic of ‘body counts’—that is so often used as a yardstick to measure violence—tends to abstract the victims of violence rather than give voice or representation to them.

Trained as a forensic technician, in her art Margolles uses unclaimed and anonymous victims she finds at the morgue that fit in with Judith Butler’s definition of

⁶⁴⁰ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specificity and Locational Identity* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 24.

‘precarious lives.’ Margolles’ works, through the use of bodily materials of corpses, attempt to remember and mourn those who have lacked representation in the socio-political matrix of the borderlands. One way she attempts to close the gap between the (passive) observer of violence and its victims is by addressing the observer’s sense of smell through the odours emanating from her use of various bodily fluids obtained from corpses. By doing so, she seeks to invade the audience’s personal space exposing them to a general sense of contamination. I will analyse this aspect of her work by considering the numerous writers and scientists who have pointed to the intimate link between smell and memory.

Finally, I will explore the epistemological value of interviews and personal narratives particularly in relation to the work of Krzysztof Wodiczko—who has done two large-scale light projections in the San Diego-Tijuana region—as well as, more broadly, the work of Ursula Biemann. The works of these three artists offer innovative ways of representing violence. Importantly, I will also consider how both Wodiczko’s and Margolles’ works can be considered as an alternative form of monument that goes against the grain of hegemonic narratives of the nation-state.

‘Ungrievable Lives’ and Necropolitics at the Borderlands

As I mentioned in the introduction, during the last two decades the violence in the Mexico-U.S. borderlands—especially in Ciudad Juárez that neighbours the Texan city of El Paso—has rapidly spiralled to unprecedented levels both in terms of the numbers of victims and the brutality of the bloodshed. The lives that have been lost in the border fit the description of Judith Butler’s notion of precarious lives that I mentioned in the previous chapter where ‘Certain lives will be highly protected [...] Other lives[...] might not even qualify as “grievable.”’⁶⁴¹ There are numerous reasons for the mounting death toll of those lives that have lacked institutionalised representation and are therefore ‘precarious’: the femicide of the maquiladora workers particularly in Ciudad Juárez (which Ursula Biemann documents in

⁶⁴¹Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), p. 32.

Performing the Border) that remains frustratingly unexplained and alarmingly under-investigated; the overlooked increase in migrant deaths as a result of escalating patrolling and surveillance technology which have forced them to opt for more dangerous routes, particularly through the inhospitable Arizonian desert, as Chantal Akerman's *From the Other Side* reveals; and finally, most notably, the so-called U.S. backed 'drug war' that was started fervently in 2006 by former Mexican president Felipe Calderón in a military attempt to crackdown the activities of drug cartels, which has resulted in at least 65,000 deaths and that, as I will explain, is notoriously difficult (and dangerous) to document and report on.⁶⁴²

The steep rise in both violence and the death toll of women working in the borderlands can be traced back to the early 1990s when the building of maquiladoras rapidly accelerated due to the deregulation policies of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which was signed in 1992 and took effect in 1994. In 1993, the brutal deaths of the women in Ciudad Juárez first caught the media attention when the news broke out that the corpses of dozens of young women and girls had been dumped in the outskirts of that city.⁶⁴³ Around a third of these women were raped and mutilated before being murdered.⁶⁴⁴ In the spring of 2004, the United Nations released a report claiming that the Mexican government's inquiry into these crimes had been greatly tainted by corruption, stating that there was ample evidence of fabrication of evidence and general negligence in conducting the investigations.⁶⁴⁵ For *Performing the Border*, Biemann amply investigated this femicide by underlining the negligence of the authorities in dealing with this violence when, for instance, she interviews a mother whose daughter had disappeared and was subsequently prevented from seeing a corpse that fit her daughter's description. She was only given the explanation that it

⁶⁴² Alan Riding, 'Safety First in Mexico,' *The New York Times*, November 28th, 2012. Date accessed: January 19th 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/29/opinion/safety-first-in-mexico.html?_r=0 Estimates of the death toll vary, often dramatically. As Riding points out, the number of dead might be as high as 100,000.

⁶⁴³ Melissa W. Wright, 'Necropolitics, Narcopolitics, and Femicide: Gendered Violence on the Mexico-U.S. Border,' *Signs* 36 (2011): 707.

⁶⁴⁴ Kathleen Staudt, *Violence and Activism at the Border: Gender, Fear and Everyday Life in Ciudad Juárez* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), p. 2.

⁶⁴⁵ Teresa Rodríguez, *The Daughters of Juárez: A True Story of Serial Murder South of the Border* (New York and London: Atria Books, 2007), pp. 263-264.

would greatly upset her. Instead, the 'explanation' left her in a state of torturous doubt.

There have been multiple unsatisfactory explanations for these murderers — none are conclusive and many, in my view, often amount to no more than conspiracy theories that raise more questions than provide answers. Geographer Melissa W. Wright, who has written extensively about the femicide at the borderlands, has pointed to the numerous theories that include the notion of the 'foreign serial killer' who lures young women for sex and then murders them; an international organ-harvesting ring who sells these organs to the U.S. market; or, commonly, the prevailing notion of 'death by culture' where the liberal influence of Mexico's northern neighbour has induced a moral decline and promiscuity that leads women to place themselves in dangerous situations which often get them raped and/or killed.⁶⁴⁶ Wright claims that these women embody what she calls 'the myth of the disposable third world women' that:

[...] Revolves around the trials and tribulations of its central protagonist—a young woman from a third world locale—who, through the passage of time, comes to personify the meaning of human disposability: someone who eventually evolves into a living state of worthlessness [...]⁶⁴⁷

In *Performing the Border*, Biemann also uses the term 'disposable women' to refer to the murdered women in Juárez. Furthermore, in her essay of the same title, Biemann claims that her discussion of the serial killings in Juárez moves away from a documentary vein and into 'speculative spaces' after stating that these murders, for the most part, have remained largely unresolved. Thus, she anchors her readings on theoretical writings about serial killers stating that such 'discursive reflections', rooted in speculation, help reveal the mechanisms of the urban pathology that has infected the region.⁶⁴⁸

⁶⁴⁶ Melissa W. Wright, *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 74-77

⁶⁴⁷ Wright, *Disposable Women*, p.2.

⁶⁴⁸ Ursula Biemann, 'Performing the Border: On Gender, Transnational Bodies and Technology,' in *Globalization on the Line: Culture, Capital and Citizenship at the U.S. Borders*, ed. Claudia Sadowski-Smith (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp.114-116.

These disposable deaths that both Biemann and Wright identify can be related to philosopher and political scientist Achille Mbembe's notion of necropolitics. This refers to the power of the sovereign state—in this case both Mexico and the United States—to define whose death is expendable and whose death is not and, more specifically in this chapter, whose lives can be disposed of to serve the neoliberal and corporate interests of the nation-state. For Mbembe, '[...] the ultimate expression of sovereignty [...] resides in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die [...] To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality.' ⁶⁴⁹

Consonant with Mbembe's notion, both Wright and Biemann attribute an economic origin to the violence that has affected the women in Juárez, arguing that these lives are deemed expendable in order to serve the economic interests the nation-state. In simpler terms, the Mexican state allows companies to use cheap and disposable labour as long as they invest economic resources in the region. In *Performing the Border*, Biemann claims 'Serial killing is a form of public violence proper to a machine culture. The industrial revolution [also] produced famous serial killers'. Thus, she compares and equates the serialised production work performed by the women in Juárez with the serialised killing and violence that has gripped the region. In addition, one of the interviewees featured in *Performing the Border*, a human rights activist, asserts that when women are murdered, the name of the maquila that they work for is often left out of the newspapers due to corporate pressure. Unsurprisingly, companies do not want to be associated in any way with the murders occurring in Juárez even though their practice enables such violence to take place. At the very least, even though they are aware of the assassinations, they do nothing to prevent them, such as providing safe transportation.

A different type of violence has also gripped the borderlands in the last few years. Since 2006 there has been an escalation of violence due to the military-driven effort to combat the drug-war. This has resulted in a spectacular demonstration of ruthless and brutal violence on the part of the cartels, one that they have publicised,

⁶⁴⁹ Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics,' trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15 (2003): 11-12.

actively propagated and largely carried out in public spaces. Indeed these violent acts are designed as acts of communication. Framing the image of the 'war on drugs' are the dismembered corpses left in public spaces and the videos and images of torture, beheadings and executions (not unlike Al-Qaeda's videos) that are disseminated through the media and other methods such as YouTube. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, who has extensively written about the Mexico U.S. border, maintains that a comprehensive analysis of the violence that surrounds this geographical area must not only take into account the actual violence but also both its theatrical qualities and symbolic dimensions.⁶⁵⁰ Similarly, in a recently published article, social scientist Matthew Carlin has extensively analysed the 'shock and awe' methods employed by the *narcos* (the colloquial term for drug cartels) arguing that this violence is actively 'staged' and relies on '[...] a particular aesthetic that sustains their fetish quality in the eyes of the public.'⁶⁵¹ Such merciless display of violence, maintains Carlin, is due both to the turf wars between cartels as well as part of a general effort to intimidate the local and federal government, journalists and the general public.⁶⁵²

Wright also notes how journalists, activists and even scholars have stopped signing or publishing their work for fear of reprisal.⁶⁵³ Mexico has become a notoriously dangerous country for journalists reporting on cartel activity with over eighty journalists being murdered since 2000.⁶⁵⁴ Newspaper agencies are often targeted by drug cartels. In fact, during the summer of 2012, two newspapers based in

⁶⁵⁰ Renato Rosaldo, 'Surveying Law and Borders,' in *The Latino/a Condition: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 635.

⁶⁵¹ Matthew Carlin, 'Guns, Gold and Corporeal Inscription: The Image of State Violence in Mexico,' in *Third Text* 26 (2012): 506.

⁶⁵² Carlin, 'Guns, Gold and Corporeal Inscription,' pp.503-505.

⁶⁵³ Wright, 'Necropolitics, Narcopolitics, and Femicide,' p.710.

⁶⁵⁴ *The Economist* reported that when traditional forms of journalism began to be silenced by the drug cartels, other forms of communication over the Internet became widespread, but that these have also been subject to both threats and violence. For example, they reported that on September 2011 two tortured bodies were found hanging from a bridge in Nuevo Laredo with a note saying that all 'snitches' using the Internet would share the same fatal fate. A year earlier, two Mexican students at Columbia University in New York started a blog in order to report on the violence in the northern industrial city of Monterrey but the site soon had to be taken down due to death threats. For more information see 'Mexico Drug War and the Internet: The Spider and the Web,' *The Economist*, September 24th 2011. Date accessed: February 12th 2013.

<http://www.economist.com/node/21530146>

the north of Mexico were attacked with grenades and automatic weapons.⁶⁵⁵ Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba—editor of a book analysing the media representation of femicide in the Mexico-U.S. border—has argued that the depiction of violence in the Mexican media has not only become a precious commodity in the ‘emotional industry’, it has also been instrumentalised to serve as political means of both government officials and members of drug cartels.⁶⁵⁶ On a similar note, Mexico-based British journalist Ioan Grillo has noted that journalists often take bribes from cartels in order to keep their names out of the papers or, even more strategically, to replace them with those of rival gangs. Such journalists are often embedded within their ‘security detail’ and can often be seen riding with cartel members.⁶⁵⁷ This is (shockingly) reminiscent of the practice of ‘embedded journalism’ that became particularly apparent during the Second Gulf War—and more recently in both Iraq and Afghanistan—where journalists accompanied specific American army units in order to cover the conflict, a procedure that problematically enabled empathy and identification with the armed forces.⁶⁵⁸

Wright has also stated that both governmental and corporate bodies tend to assign blame for both the drug violence and the violence perpetrated against numerous maquiladora workers on the victims, rather than acknowledging some of the systemic reasons behind the increasing violence. The dead women in Juárez are often blamed for their own misfortunes for, for instance, being sexually promiscuous, working as prostitutes or being heavy drug users, rather than holding accountable the governmental bodies that have failed to protect their citizens. Using the same logic, the violence perpetrated by drug cartels is often depicted by the government and the media as the sole product of turf wars that for the most part, they argue, only affect

⁶⁵⁵ Randal C. Archibold, ‘Attacks on Mexico Papers Underline Peril to Journalists,’ *The New York Times*, July 11th 2012. Date accessed: January 16th 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/12/world/americas/attacks-on-mexico-papers-underline-peril-to-journalists.html>

⁶⁵⁶ Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, ‘Death on the Screen: Imaging Violence in Border Media,’ in *Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2010), pp.67-8.

⁶⁵⁷ Ioan Grillo, *El Narco: The Bloody Rise of Mexican Drug Cartels* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), p. 74.

⁶⁵⁸ Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski, ‘Introduction: Why Media Witnessing? Why Now?,’ in *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication*, ed. Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 2.

those who are involved in the illegal drug trade. Following this logic, innocent civilians are supposed to remain safe as long as they do not involve themselves in illicit activities, again (wrongly) exonerating governmental bodies from responsibility.⁶⁵⁹

These explanations, as Wright points out, unfortunately have led to the normalisation and even the indifferent acceptance of violence that, in turn, weakens public sympathy for victims and leaves many without political representation. Their personal narratives—as I will discuss at the end of this chapter—are often treated as fabrications. Trauma studies academic Kalí Tal maintains that one of the preferred strategies for dealing with personal narratives that threaten the integrity of nation-states is ‘accomplished by undermining the credibility of the survivor’, especially those survivors that are marginalised or lack institutionalised representation.⁶⁶⁰

Towards Abstraction: Strategies for Representing Violence

None of the artists I will be discussing in this chapter engage with the kind of violent photojournalistic images that so often circulate in the Mexican press. For example, Krzysztof Wodiczko and Ursula Biemann both use interviews. Wodiczko creates large-scale light projections on buildings that feature interviews, thus creating temporary monuments and giving voice to the victims of violence. In what follows, as mentioned, I will focus specifically on Margolles’ work. To begin with, I will discuss the kind of graphic imagery that represents the violence at the Mexico-U.S. borderlands and then examine in particular Margolles’ works in relation to abstraction as a means of representation. It seems crucial to me—especially in light of the *de facto* censorship that the media face in documenting the violence at the Mexico-U.S. boundaries—to find alternative or complementary paradigms to critically represent and understand the current state of events in that region.

Many academics have examined the problems arising from the consumption and production of brutal images of violence. As I mentioned in the introduction, for Slavoj

⁶⁵⁹ Wright, ‘Necropolitics, Narcopolitics, and Femicide,’ pp.719-720.

⁶⁶⁰ Kalí Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.6.

Žižek 'subjective violence' refers to an image-making system that fosters voyeuristic fascination with violence.⁶⁶¹ An example of subjective violence would be the images of drug-cartel related beheadings that became commonplace in the Mexican press after the start of the 'drug war.' In relation to subjective violence, Margolles underscored the role that the individual consumer of drugs plays in fuelling *narco* violence when she handed out *Cards to Cut Out Cocaine* (**Plate 5.1**) at the opening of her 2009 show at the Venice Biennale entitled *What Else Could We Talk About?*, a work that I will discuss in detail throughout this chapter. These cards showcased a gruesome picture of a young murdered body. Reminding visitors of the ultimate human costs of the widespread practice of purchasing illegal drugs, the card read in both English and Spanish, 'What else could we talk about?' followed by 'This person was murdered because of links with organised crime.' Margolles distributed these cards in a 16th century Venetian palace, allocated to her by the organisers of the Biennale, where she showcase numerous other works that included a flag infused with blood collected from an execution site, a blood drenched banner embroidered with messages left by drug cartels (such as 'Thus Finish the Rats' and 'Until All Your Children Fall'), an open safety box containing the gold jewellery of victims involved in a crossfire as well as a large installation consisting of fabrics that were used to clean murder grounds. (**Plates 5.2, 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5.**)

The problem with subjective violence of the kind that is shown in *Cards to Cut Out Cocaine*, according to Žižek, is that it tends to eclipse the systemic reasons that lead to the violent imagery in the first place.⁶⁶² As I argued in the introduction violence is imbricated within the current system, often navigating unnoticed. An example would be the aforementioned Mexican state's implementation of neoliberalist policies—especially conspicuous in the *maquiladoras*—that need disposable and expendable female workers in order to function. Discussing prostitution in *Performing the Border*, Biemann also points to systemic violence when she claims that 'Prostitution is not just part and parcel of the tax-free consumer binge that takes place at the border; it is a structural part of global capitalism whereby the

⁶⁶¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2008), p. 2.

⁶⁶² Žižek, *Violence*, pp.1-2.

female worker is literally addressed in her sexuality.’⁶⁶³ If following Žižek, the consumerist culture to which we are all inevitably bound to creates a system that not only supports but also necessitates systemic violence in order to maintain its very existence, then we all have a part to play—even if involuntarily—in the current violent state of affairs. Although *Cards* stands out in Margolles’ oeuvre as one of the few instances in which she showcases ‘subjective violence,’ she does remind viewers, like in most of her work, of ‘systemic violence’ — e.g. purchasing drugs leads to loss of human life. Few would dare to cut cocaine with these gruesome cards.

Mieke Bal has also discussed ‘subjective violence’ maintaining that violent imagery can kindle voyeurism. This statement echoes a similar claim made by Susan Sontag in her seminal book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, where she notes how at times ‘[...] the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked’,⁶⁶⁴ and how ‘Image-glut keeps attention light [...] relatively indifferent to content.’⁶⁶⁵ Bal further adds that such images foster a ‘potential for sadistic viewing and masochistic identification,’ promote reductive generalisations of complex socio-political affairs and, most importantly, cultivate an indifference or apathy catalysed by the sheer number and reproducibility of such images.⁶⁶⁶

I am not arguing that in order to critically assess violence it is necessary to abstain from looking at brutal imagery, especially in the case of drug cartel violence in which such images try to manipulate the public into a state of permanent fear. Not engaging with these images is a form of censorship. Some academics have rightly pointed to the democratic potential of having images widely available. Photography theorist Ariella Azoulay, for instance, maintains that:

⁶⁶³ Ursula Biemann, ‘Making the Transnational Intelligible: Performing the Border,’ in *Mission Reports: Artistic Practice in the Field, Video Works 1998-2008*, ed. Ursula Biemann and Jan Erik Lundström (Bristol: Arnolfini, 2008), p. 20.

⁶⁶⁴ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 41.

⁶⁶⁵ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 106.

⁶⁶⁶ Mieke Bal, ‘Imaging Pain,’ in *Ethics and Images of Pain*, ed. Asbjørn Grønstad and Henrik Gustafsson (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), p. 115.

Photography[...] paved the way for universal citizenship: not a state, but a citizenry, a virtual citizenry, in potential, with the civil contract of photography as its organizing framework. Citizenship in the citizenry of photography asks not to be stopped at borders and plays a vital political role in making sure other cultures are accessible, in all of their prestige or misery [...] Photography[...] bestows universal citizenship on a new citizenry whose citizens produce, distribute and look at images.’⁶⁶⁷

Azoulay anchors spectatorship in civil duty maintaining that photography created a new political community, one that was not under the thumb of a sovereign power. Therefore, those who lack the rights privileges afforded by citizenship and belonging to a nation-state are able to participate in this new community. ‘Photography,’ claimed Azoulay ‘deterritorializes citizenship.’⁶⁶⁸ Also pointing to the democratising potential of photography, John Taylor, author of *Body Horror*, underlines the importance of violent images. For him, even though they can ‘overpower “objective vision” and “re-enchant the world” through spectacle’,⁶⁶⁹ they can also keep alive memories and narratives of horrific historical events, encourage an ethically oriented dialogue seeking to understand (although not justify) such events and, finally, their mass appeal enhances the urgency of finding solutions.⁶⁷⁰

To my knowledge, however, artists have for the most part abstained from engaging directly with the extreme violence imagery that has recently marked the borderlands, unlike art practitioners working in war torn areas such as Iraq and Afghanistan, as is the case of Thomas Hirschhorn.⁶⁷¹ This field, I believe, is still in need

⁶⁶⁷ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2008), p. 134.

⁶⁶⁸ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, p.25.

⁶⁶⁹ John Taylor, *Body Horror: Photojournalism, Catastrophe and War* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 8.

⁶⁷⁰ Taylor, *Body Horror*, pp.1-7.

⁶⁷¹ For readers interested in the violent imagery that has surrounded the ‘drug war,’ there are multiple ‘news’ sites dedicated to its documentation. For instance, *El Blog del Narco* [www.blogdelnarco], which is run from an unknown location by a person who has wished to remain anonymous, posts allegedly uncensored articles, photographs and videos sent in by citizens, journalists as well as drug cartel members. [Grillo, *El Narco*, p. 220]. There are multiple examples of artists working with violent imagery in relation to the recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. To give one notable example, Thomas Hirschhorn’s *The Incommensurable Banner* (2007), which was first shown in the Brighton Biennial of 2008, consists of an enormous banner that covered an entire wall of the Fabrica gallery in which he arranged multiple photographs of the victims of the ‘war on terror.’ These images, that Hirschhorn obtained from newspaper and online sources, left little to the imagination as they showed mutilated corpses. For more information about this work, see the Fabrica gallery’s website:

of ample and more critical investigation, one that expands beyond the confines of journalistic endeavours, which are often, unfortunately, entangled with drug cartel politics. Considering the arguments of Taylor and Azoulay, dealing with such imagery can be productive in several ways. But the lack of artists analysing these images can be perhaps a result of what Coco Fusco identified in 2001 as a neo-formalist trajectory in Mexico's artistic production.⁶⁷² Fusco claims:

[...] The recent art from Mexico City that has received the most support, media coverage, and international attention has evinced the most attenuated forms of social commentary or avoided it altogether. (I am here thinking of such artists as Gabriel Orozco, Francis Alys[...and] Melanie Smith [...]). What was consistently clear to me from conversations I had with the new protagonists of Mexico City's art scene in the wake of NAFTA was that neoformalism was the strategy of choice.⁶⁷³

Margolles herself seems to direct the attention to this stark gap on Mexico's art scene by befittingly naming her show in the Venice biennale of 2009 *What Else Could We Talk About?*, as if condemning Mexico's art scene general political apathy.

It is worth examining, however, reasons other than apathy for this apparent political indifference. To start with, the country's socio-political climate has changed dramatically since the turn of the millennium—the time Fusco identified this problem—especially in northern Mexico, so that the lack of committed political engagement could also be attributed to the violent reprisals taken against people who have tried to document the drug war. As I have noted, the censorship of images is a complex and cryptic subject, with multiple actors involved. Attempting to unravel the political forces behind this power dynamic is daunting, especially for individual artists with limited funds. From an ethical perspective, another explanation for the apparent political apathy is the unease about dealing with such horrific imagery of the kind that Bal expresses.

<http://fabrica.org.uk/exhibitions/exhibition-archive/the-incommensurable-banner/the-incommensurable-banner-further-reading-2/>. Date Accessed: 19th February 2013.

⁶⁷²Coco Fusco, 'The Unbearable Weightiness of Beings: Art in Mexico after NAFTA,' in *The Bodies That Were Not Ours* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 64.

⁶⁷³ Fusco, 'The Unbearable Weightiness,' p. 64.

And in the case of Margolles—who Fusco claims is an exception to the widespread artists political apathy in Mexico—the answer is a search for alternative forms of addressing violence. Margolles finds a novel way of representing the current violence at the border through disturbingly alluring abstract works made up of bodily materials from deceased victims, created through a series of deeply morbid processes including the flag that was dipped into the blood gathered from an execution site **(Plate 5.2)** as well as the bloody embroidered fabrics, hung on the walls like abstract paintings **(Plate 5.3)**. In *What Else Could We Talk About?* the abovementioned rectangular fabrics used to clean the sites of ‘drug war’ victims were hung on the exhibition walls, creating eerie but highly evocative non-figurative pieces **(Plate 5.5)**. There are antecedents to this non-figurative or abstract representation of violence and bloodshed. For instance, Margolles’ works are reminiscent of Andreas Serrano’s disturbingly captivating *Bloodscape V* (1989) photograph **(Plate 5.6)**, taken during the height of the AIDS ‘crisis,’ that shows blood and urine merging inside a Plexiglas container.⁶⁷⁴ For bell hooks, when Serrano started using blood imagery in his work he ‘shattered the cultural taboo that prohibits any public celebration of blood [...]’ also arguing that he aimed to ‘challenge our fixed visions of art and culture.’⁶⁷⁵ In a more commemorating note, abstraction has been used as a way to remember victims, notably in American architect Peter Eisenman’s *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (2005) in the centre of Berlin. This monument consists of 2,700 very large concrete stelae that the visitor is meant to walk amongst **(Plate 5.7)**.⁶⁷⁶ More recently, a memorial in Mexico City opened in April of 2013 to commemorate the victims of the ‘drug war’. It consisted of large rusted metal panels—in both their scale and shape almost seem to reference Eisenman’s *Memorial*—inscribed with numerous quotations of several renowned Mexican authors like Octavio Paz**(Plate 5.8)**. Passers-

⁶⁷⁴ Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1999), pp. 53-54.

⁶⁷⁵ bell hooks, ‘The Radiance of Red: Blood Work,’ in *Andres Serrano: Body And Soul*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: Takarajima Books, 1995), unpaginated.

⁶⁷⁶ Mark Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 262.

by are also welcome to carve in their own thoughts—one of the inscriptions reads: ‘Fewer monuments. Less minutes of silence. More action.’⁶⁷⁷

Margolles’ abstract works—like the non-figurative fabrics that ‘adorned’ the exhibition at Venice—are almost evocative of the kind of abstraction that characterised many artists working in the United States under the label of Abstract Expressionism but, unlike these artists, her work steers away from any kind of depoliticised abstraction. Also interested in the representation of violence, we can think of American painter Leon Golub who started his career in the 1940s and 1950s in Chicago, and initially looked for inspiration at the work of New York’s Abstract Expressionists, but instead turned his attention to representations of violence. He has claimed that ‘If I had to give a description of my work I would say it’s a definition of how power is demonstrated through the body and in human actions, and in our time, how power and stress and political and industrial powers are shown.’⁶⁷⁸ Not unlike Jackson Pollock, his deep dark red pieces were often made by applying paint on the floor and then distressingly if not violently scraping it off with the use of a meat cleaver.⁶⁷⁹ Sometimes, as in *Napalm Shield I* (1970-1971) he would place large blobs of paint onto discarded canvases stitched together to create abstract pieces (**Plate 5.9**).⁶⁸⁰ For art historian Jon Bird, the process behind *Napalm Shield I* ‘suggests the indexical trace of a dying warrior’s bleeding body, a shrouded memento mori of the wounds of history.’⁶⁸¹ As I will discuss in more detail later on, in her installation at the Venice biennale, Margolles also creates ‘indexical traces’ of drug war victims by imprinting fabrics on the body of bloody corpses, thus also creating commemorative shrouds.

Art historian Mark Godfrey, who has written about abstraction in relation to the Holocaust, claims that ‘In front of abstract works, the lack of a depicted image

⁶⁷⁷ Damien Cave, ‘These Walls Speak, Recalling the Victims of Violence,’ *The New York Times*, August 22nd 2013. Date Accessed: August 23rd 2013.

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/23/world/americas/these-walls-speak-recalling-victims-of-violence.html?nl=todaysheadlines&emc=edit_th_20130823

⁶⁷⁸ Quoted in Jon Bird, *Leon Golub: Echoes of the Real* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), p. 89

⁶⁷⁹ Bird, *Leon Golub*, pp. 17-22.

⁶⁸⁰ Bird, *Leon Golub*, p.50.

⁶⁸¹ Bird, *Leon Golub*, p.54.

tends to heighten our awareness of materials, of compositional (or anti-compositional) structures, or the process of looking itself.’⁶⁸² Abstract works, according to Godfrey, can elicit the encounter between viewer and spectator and foreground the process of perception itself.⁶⁸³ Indeed, in the case of Margolles’ works, it is the ‘heightened awareness of materials,’ obtained from the morgue and murder sites, and the process of making them that strongly drive their political message. Both her abstract pieces and the materials employed to make them draw interesting connections between violence and abstraction and, in turn, propose a new strategy for the critical representation of violence. But in precisely what ways can violence be effectively and critically represented abstractly? How is it different from figurative and graphic representation?

Abstraction especially as a form of representing casualties and victims in conflict, has been linked by academics to power structures. For instance, discussing the Holocaust, Zygmunt Bauman maintains that:

Abstraction is one of the modern mind’s principal powers. When applied to humans, that power means effacing the face: whatever marks remain on the face serve as badges of membership, the signs belonging to a category and the fate meted out to the owner of the face is nothing more yet nothing less either than the treatment reserved for the *category*, of which the owner of the face is but a *specimen*. The overall effect of abstraction is that rules routinely followed in personal interaction, ethical rules most prominent among them, do not interfere where the handing of a category is concerned, including every entity classified into that category just on account of having been so classified [...] For genocide to be possible personal differences must be obliterated and faces must be melted into the uniform mass of abstract category.’⁶⁸⁴

As I will argue throughout this essay, Margolles’ abstraction, however, is of a different kind. Her work opens up the possibility of representing violence through abstraction that is neither complicit with ‘one of the modern mind’s principal powers’ when applied to humans, nor does it have de-individualising effects.

⁶⁸² Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust*, p.4.

⁶⁸³ Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust*, p.5.

⁶⁸⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p.227.

Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' concept of the face is useful in this context. He advocates a moral and ethical responsibility to others that exists *outside* the straightjacket of figurative representation that, as I have pointed out, has been instrumentalised in several ways. It is important to underline here that Levinas does not define the face in physiognomical terms. Rather, almost with theological undertones, for Levinas '[...] the face is not in front of me [...] but *above* me' (my emphasis),⁶⁸⁵ claiming elsewhere that 'the face is not exclusively a human face.'⁶⁸⁶ Although the face is not exclusively a 'human face,' it is the condition of humanisation and it also escapes any linguistic framework. The face does not speak but *conveys* the biblical commandment of 'though shall not kill.' Indeed, more broadly, Levinas conceptualises ethics as devoid of representation, maintaining that it is '[...]a vision without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing, objectifying virtues of images.'⁶⁸⁷ The face, explains Judith Butler whilst discussing Levinas' work, is the 'wordless vocalization of suffering that marks the limits of linguistic translation [...]';⁶⁸⁸ it helps us apprehend the precariousness of the life of the Other and, more broadly, life itself. Levinas has also written:

The approach to the face is the most basic mode of responsibility [...] The face is the other who asks me not to let him die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his death. Thus the face says to me: you shall not kill [...] My ethical relation of love for the other stems from the fact that the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the world[...] In ethics, the other's right to exist has primacy over my own, a primacy epitomized in the ethical edict: you shall not kill, you shall not jeopardize the life of the other.⁶⁸⁹

Levinas' concept of the face can be taken as an abstract representation of suffering, one that slips through the fingers of language and figurative representation. Godfrey,

⁶⁸⁵ Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, 'Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,' in *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany: Sunny Press, 1986), p.23.

⁶⁸⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Peace and Proximity,' in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 167.

⁶⁸⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Dequesne University Press, 1969), p. 23.

⁶⁸⁸ Butler, *Precarious Life*, p.134.

⁶⁸⁹ Levinas and Kearney, 'Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,' pp.23-24.

in his study of abstraction and the Holocaust, also clarifies '[...] the idea of *seeing* the face was, for Levinas, metaphorical.'⁶⁹⁰ Philosopher Lawrence Burns who similarly has analysed Levinas' concept of the face in relation to abstraction explains: '[...] the other must be *disembodied* in order to be truly other in Levinas' sense [...]' adding that '[...] the abstract character of the face gives it its authority to attribute responsibility and to motivate the subject to intervene in a particular situation.'⁶⁹¹ The face, as Burns continues, is unrepresentable and '[...] rather than being a physical face, the face of which Levinas speaks is an event that institutes a particular relationship between embodied subjects,'⁶⁹² Seeing Margolles' blood drenched installations precisely institutes this event that Levinas articulates via the concept of the face. They are abstract—like the blood imbrued fabrics—but this very abstractness and the materiality with which her work is created forces an ethical encounter with the unrepresentable other. As such the face is not represented in Margolles' works in themselves; rather, the face is the *encounter* between the viewer and the work that, in turn, entices ethical reflection. This is not to say that Margolles' works are free from ethical trespasses but quite the contrary. There is little doubt that there is a problematic ethical implication, an inherent violence, in using for display the materials of (often) unclaimed corpses, which inevitably has the purpose of advancing the artist's own career. Through Margolles' works these bodies become doubly violated: not only have they been abandoned by the nation-state but their remains have been commodified and freely used for artistic purposes. However, once that I have analysed the innovative strategies she employs, I will argue that the ethical boundaries that Margolles crosses reveal something fundamental about the relationship with violence and representation.

⁶⁹⁰ Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust*, p.138.

⁶⁹¹ Lawrence Burns, 'Identifying Concrete Ethical Demands in the Face of the Abstract Other: Emmanuel Levinas' Pragmatic Ethics,' *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 34 (2008): 316.

⁶⁹² Burns, 'Identifying Concrete Ethical Demands,' p.322.

The Materiality of Death: Teresa Margolles and the Counter-Image

Margolles—trained as a forensic technician—started her artistic career as a member of the collective group SEMEFO (acronym for Servicio Médico Forense or ‘Forensic Medical Service’). SEMEFO’S work first shocked the public and critic’s eye in 1993 when, in Mexico City’s museum Carrillo Gil, they displayed *Lavatio Corporis* **(Plate 5.10)** that consisted of the decaying corpses of horses, filling the exhibition’s air with the stench of the decaying flesh. Three years later, they shifted from using animal to human remains. In a work entitled *Dermis* **(Plate 5.11)** they pressed human corpses against white ambulance stretchers in order to imprint faint silhouettes with blood that, as Mexican art critic and curator Cuauhtémoc Medina has pointed out, are reminiscent of French artist’s Yves Klein works entitled *Anthropométries* of the 1960s **(Plate 5.12)**. For these works, Klein covered several female models in paint and urged them to imprint their figure onto large sheets of paper.⁶⁹³ By the late 1990s, Teresa Margolles started working alone and in 2000 she exhibited her notorious work *Tongue* **(Plate 5.13)** at the Ace Gallery in New York, where she displayed the severed tongue of a teenager who lost his life in a violent incident in Mexico City. The teenager’s mother gave Margolles her son’s tongue in exchange for money to pay for his funeral services, which otherwise she could not have afforded. Margolles international reputation was arguably solidified a year later when she exhibited *Vaporización* at the P.S.1 in New York **(Plate 5.14)**, where she filled an entire gallery space with vapour created from the water that was used to clean corpses in Mexico City’s morgue.⁶⁹⁴ More recently, she shifted her attention to the violence occurring at the borderlands and produced many works, some of which are analysed below in this chapter, using for instance the sweat of the women in Juárez who live in a state of permanent fear, the blood of the victims of drug violence as well as the water that was to clean corpses at the morgue.

⁶⁹³ For a thorough history of both SEMEFO’s and Teresa Margolles’ artistic development prior to 2001 see Cuauhtémoc Medina, ‘Zones of Tolerance: Teresa Margolles, SEMEFO and Beyond,’ *Parachute* 104 (2001): 33-45.

⁶⁹⁴ Gabriela Jauregui, ‘Necropolis: Exhuming the Works of Teresa Margolles,’ in *Teresa Margolles: Muerte Sin Fin*, ed. Udo Kittelmann and Klaus Görner (Osfieldern-Ruit: Museum Für Moderne Kunst, 2004), p. 177.

Margolles' use of these materials exposes her audience to the very materiality of death instead of its representation. In what follows, I will attempt to place Margolles' work within an art historical context that goes back to artworks produced in the 1960s and 1970s, which foregrounds the discursive potential of unconventional materials. Indeed, this interest in bodily fluids, use of organic materials and even human remains can be traced back to artistic practices that emerged in the 1960s. These include the works of Joseph Beuys and of other artists under the aegis of the Viennese Actionists—which Margolles often refer to in relation to her own work—as well as those carried out by Italian artists associated with Arte Povera.⁶⁹⁵

Even though SEMEFO and later Margolles' work has often been linked to Mexican culture and its alleged fascination with death—especially the Day of the Dead—I will steer away from these readings. My approach is partly a response to the issues identified independently by both art historian Orianna Baddeley and artist Coco Fusco: readings anchored in motifs of 'Mexican culture' tend to offer a reductive characterisation of contemporary Mexico in order to satisfy audiences' desires for geographically determined 'authentic' cultural expressions.⁶⁹⁶ More importantly, I think that reading Margolles' works within this tradition distracts and dilutes from what her work is responding to: the violence that characterises contemporary Mexico. This situation is far more present and urgent than any ritual related to the Day of the Dead.

Artists working under the umbrella of Arte Povera often used organic or living materials creating time-based objects that deteriorated and or transformed in time. For example, using living 'materials,' in 1969 Rome based artist Jannis Kounellis displayed *Senza Titolo (12 cavalli)* (Untitled[12 horses]) **(Plate 5.15)** in which he displayed a dozen horses—these were live horses unlike SEMEFO's *Lavatio Corporis*—in a gallery in Rome. Continuing his use of unconventional materials in his work

⁶⁹⁵ Quoted in Nike Bätzner, 'Human Dignity Shall be Palpable,' in *Teresa Margolles: 127 Cuerpos*, trans. Christopher Jenkin-Jones (Düsseldorf: Walther König, 2007), p.171.

⁶⁹⁶ Oriana Baddeley, *Professorial Platforms: Teresa Margolles and the Pathology of Everyday Death* (London: Chelsea College of Art and Design, 2009), pp. 10-12 and Fusco, 'Art in Mexico After NAFTA,' pp.76-77.

Untitled of 1989, he showed haunches of beef hanging from hooks.⁶⁹⁷ Curator Corinna Criticos has noted that these artists were interesting in using unconventional materials as a way of '[...] express[ing] meaning and suggest[ing] mental processes' ⁶⁹⁸ as well as addressing sensory experience not bound by an ocularcentric logic. In fact, these works often displace the visual in favour of the haptic or olfactory—the latter especially conspicuous in Margolles' works, as I will go on to discuss—and underscore the participation and perception of the audience.

There are several other artists that have used 'organic materials', including animal corpses, in their work. To give a few examples, Joseph Beuys' famous 1965 performance *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (**Plate 5.16**), in which the artist, wearing a mask made out of honey and gold leaf, 'explained' pictures to a dead hare that was limply positioned on his arm. ⁶⁹⁹ More recently, feminist Canadian artist Jana Sterbak's *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* of 1987 (**Plate 5.17**) was actually constructed out of slabs of beef sewn and hung together to form a simply shaped dress. Worn by a model, the piece was subsequently photographed.⁷⁰⁰ The slowly rotting flesh and the name of the piece—*vanitas*—morbidly underscores both death and its accompanying decomposition processes, functioning as a *memento mori*. A feminist reading renders the woman wearing the dress as a 'piece of meat.'⁷⁰¹ Another (famous) example is British artist Damien Hirst's use of animal corpses immersed in formaldehyde tanks, such as the shark featured in his well-known *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991). His work, however, unlike Margolles' is uncritically spectacular and lacks any sustained political critique. ⁷⁰² Margolles' art not only force us to reflect on the process of death but, more

⁶⁹⁷ Stephen Bann, *Jannis Kounellis* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), p. 134.

⁶⁹⁸ Corina Criticos, 'Reading Arte Povera,' in *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 2001), p. 86.

⁶⁹⁹ Nato Thomson, *Becoming Animal: Contemporary Art in the Animal Kingdom* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), p. 10.

⁷⁰⁰ Lewis Johnson, 'More or Less Than Objects: Unapproachable Alterity and the Work of Jana Sterbak and Rosemarie Trockel,' in *Other than Identity: The Subject, Politics and Art*, ed. Juliet Steyn (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 174

⁷⁰¹ Diana Nemiroff, 'States of Being,' in *Jana Sterbak: States of Being* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1991), pp. 29-31.

⁷⁰² Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: The Rise and Fall of Young British Art* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), p. 20.

critically and context-specifically, on the necropolitics that frames the Mexico-U.S. borderlands.

The fact that Margolles' 'materials' are time-sensitive allows for a politically motivated evocation of death. She maintains that the Viennese Actionist artists, who were influential to her work, were also interested in the 'politics of death.' During the 1960s a group of artists in Vienna—which included Otto Muehl and Günter Brus—expressed contempt for what they perceived to be a conservative Austrian society, still haunted by the atrocities committed by the Nazi's and struggling to come to terms with their consequences. They wanted to comment on Austria's role during the Second World War, effusively rejecting what they deemed to be a politically disengaged (particularly Greenbergian) Modernism, and instead looked to Freud's writings for inspiration as well as the practices undertaken by artists working under the umbrella of Fluxus.⁷⁰³

These Viennese artists also experimented with unconventional materials, but unlike those working in Italy at the time, they often used human and animal bodily parts and fluids and often mutilated their own bodies in their works, actions and performances attracting horror and denunciation from both the public and the critics. For instance, Brus, in one of his performances, undressed himself and then, with the use of a razor, cut both his chest and thighs. Next, after urinating in a flask and then drinking its contents, he masturbated whilst singing the Austrian national anthem. He was arrested and given a sentence of six months (although he fled to Berlin to avoid imprisonment). According to Brus, his performances are politically motivated and the self-inflicted wounds make reference to the medical experiments that the Nazis conducted on prisoner's bodies.⁷⁰⁴

According to art historian and curator Hubert Klocker, who has written extensively on Viennese Actionism, they worked under the hypothesis that only by radically engaging with 'body politics', and acknowledging that bodies are the bearers of meaning in discourse, can society find the key to create an 'authentically

⁷⁰³ Michael Rush, 'A Noisy Silence,' *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 21 (1999): 5.

⁷⁰⁴ Cecilia Novelo, 'Painful Painting and Brutal Ecstasy: The Material Actions of Günter Brus and Otto Muehl,' *A Journal of Germanic Studies* 43 (2007): 453-461.

revolutionary awareness' with a potential capable of changing hegemonic values. This engagement had to exist outside both linguistic and ideological discourses, which in turn explains the brutal self-mutilating acts.⁷⁰⁵ Such approach resonates with the Levinasian concept of the face, also existing outside a linguistic framework.

The use of human bodily 'materials' motivated by a clearly defined political project certainly has ties with Margolles' oeuvre but, unlike these artists, Margolles' subtle post minimalist aesthetic is more concerned with the politics of mourning — almost a 'quiet' political critique rather than a ritualised aesthetic performance. In many respects, Margolles' work shares Joseph Beuys' 'aesthetic of mourning' as notably argued by art historian Gene Ray in his seminal essay 'Joseph Beuys and the After-Auschwitz Sublime.' According to Ray, even though Beuys never acknowledged such project, many of his works can be read as an evocation and a mourning of the Holocaust victims, and his work's ability to astonish and disturb can be tied to the notion of the sublime.⁷⁰⁶ Important in Ray's understanding of Beuys work is his use of materials such as fat and felt. In one of his actions of 1964, Beuys melted some blocks of fat in a stove creating a *Fat Box* which, for Ray, is a blunt allusion to the crematoria at the concentration camps; the felt—a signature material in his work—is redolent of the fabric weaved from the hair of the death camp's victims in German factories during the war.⁷⁰⁷ Discussing Beuys' 1985 sculptural installation *Plight* (**Plate 5.18**), which consisted of two rooms filled with stacks of felt columns, a silent piano, a thermometer and a chalkboard, Ray points to the piece's strong evocative mourning and memorial attributes. He links the silent piano to Theodore Adorno's dictum that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz, arguing that 'Only an art in that register, an art which evokes and avows, which strikes, hits and hollows, can hope to honor the major trauma of the historical referent.'⁷⁰⁸

⁷⁰⁵ Hubert Klocker, 'Viennese Actionism/ Bodypolitics,' in *Viennese Actionism: Günter Brus, Otto Muehl, Hermann Nitsch, Rudolf Schwarz-Kogler*, ed. Pilar Parcerisas (Seville: Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, 2008), pp. 26-27.

⁷⁰⁶ Gene Ray, 'Joseph Beuys and the After-Auschwitz Sublime,' in *Joseph Beuys: Mapping the Legacy*, ed. Gene Ray (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2001), pp. 56-58.

⁷⁰⁷ Ray, Joseph Beuys,' pp.61-66.

⁷⁰⁸ Ray, 'Joseph Beuys,' p. 68.

Beuys has significantly argued that the horror of Auschwitz cannot be 'represented in an image' so that he sought to 'remember' this genocide with what he denominated 'its positive counter image.'⁷⁰⁹ This notion of the 'counter-image' is precisely what Margolles' work attempts to create, to urges us to remember those who have lost their lives in the violent conflicts that characterise the Mexico-U.S. border.

Beyond Representation: The Trace and the Materiality of Death in Teresa Margolles' Work

According to Medina, Margolles' solo work has become less preoccupied with inducing shock and flouting social conventions, as is the case of the Viennese Actionists. Rather, it has been increasingly absorbed with the politics of mourning and with the exploration of the kind of socio-political matrix that has led to the mounting number of corpses deposited in the morgue.⁷¹⁰ In fact, in 2005, Margolles stated that her aim was to 'talk about murdered people, voiceless bodies, those who are forgotten with impunity, about absence and fear and most of all the grief of their families.'⁷¹¹ Although Margolles' main focus during the start of the millennium was the violence taking place in Mexico City, she has recently turned her attention to both the murdered women in Juárez and the spiralling violence that has gripped the country at large as a result of Calderón's military intervention.

Margolles' work entitled *Lote Bravo, Lomas de Poleo, Anapra y Cerro de Cristo Negro* of 2005 is an installation piece that included a video of a long car journey, shot during day and night, in which she visits the sites where four bodies of women from Juárez were found. In this installation she showcased a brick sculpture she made out of the sand of these locations and also another piece made up of fifty adobe tombstones **(Plates 5.19 and 5.20)**. Some of Margolles' work is centred on the traces that these bodies have left behind and on the absence of narrative that, for obvious

⁷⁰⁹Ray, 'Joseph Beuys,' p. 70

⁷¹⁰ Medina, 'Zones of Tolerance,' p.41.

⁷¹¹ Quoted in Bätzner, 'Human Dignity,' p.170.

reasons, these deceased victims of violence cannot provide. It is useful here to compare her work with that of Guatemalan artist Regina Galindo, who won the Golden Lion award for the best young artist at the 2005 Venice Biennale for her video piece *Who Can Erase the Traces?* **(Plate 5.21)**. The video shows the artist's walk from two iconic buildings in Guatemala City carrying a basin containing human blood. Occasionally dipping her feet in the basin, she left a trail of bloody footprints in order to protest against the nomination of a presidential candidate who had been part of a military coup that resulted in widespread violence.⁷¹²

Although Galindo did not use the blood of the victims themselves, as Margolles' work repeatedly does, both artists focus on the traces left behind by the dead. Mieke Bal, discussing the work of Colombian artist Doris Salcedo maintains that the trace is a powerful alternative to representation. Margolles' showcased the traces left behind by victims, including not only the fabrics used to clean the murder sites but also the gold jewellery that belonged to a person murdered during a drug related crossfire. Similarly, Salcedo recurrently uses traces in the form of objects left behind by the victims of Colombia's civil war. For example, in her series created in the 1990s, entitled *Atrabilarios* (1991-1996) **(Plate 5.22)**, Salcedo placed several shoes into wood-framed boxes covered by a translucent material, and hung them on the wall like paintings, producing a phantasmagorical view into their contents. These shoes belonged to women who had been tortured and killed and subsequently dumped into mass graves.⁷¹³ In a similar way, French artist Christian Boltanski in his installation work *Canada* (1988) **(Plate 5.23)** accumulated various clothing items piled up in heaps. Importantly, the title *Canada* not only refers to the country that hosted this gigantic installation but also, more sinisterly, to *Kanada*, the euphemism Nazi's used for the storage place where they deposited the belongings of Jews during their

⁷¹² Dora Apel, *War Culture and the Contest of Images* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2012), p.115.

⁷¹³ Nancy Princenthal, 'Silence Seen,' in *Doris Salcedo*, ed. Nancy Princenthal, Carlos Basualdo and Andreas Huyssen (London: Phaidon, 2000), pp.49-50.

extermination campaign.⁷¹⁴ The items that both Boltanski and Salcedo display fit in with Mieke Bal's definition of the trace, which

[...]Becomes an alternative to the generalizations of humanistic categories
[...] The trace [...] has no content, only a void that points to a content in the past or future. This is its primary negativity. It vacates the present [...]even though it is empty, the trace is also absolutely singular [...]⁷¹⁵

Bal, discussing Salcedo's work, defines these objects as traces that 'point to a content in the past or future.' They are evocative of those who used to possess them and, for Bal, they offer '[...] an alternative to representation and its abstracting effects.'⁷¹⁶ As such, through the trace, the gold jewellery that Margolles showcases provides an alternative to other forms of violent representation.

In addition to the trace, Margolles focuses on indices left behind by dead bodies. Art historian Rosalind Krauss defines the index as '[...] that type of sign which arises as the physical manifestation of a cause, of which traces, imprints, and clues are examples.'⁷¹⁷ In her show in Venice, Margolles created indices by impregnating fabrics with the bodily fluids of murdered people. Discussing the index, film and media academic Mary Ann Doane argues that 'indices always refer to singulars—single units, individuals, unique events [...] The function of the index is that of sheer indication, denotation and it serves primarily as an assurance of an existence'⁷¹⁸ also stating that the index promises '[...] the rematerialization of time.'⁷¹⁹ Because 'indices always refer to singular' individuals, like Bal's notion of the trace which 'is also absolutely singular', they propose an effective alternative to normative forms of representation and their accompanying abstracting effects. Though the pieces created

⁷¹⁴ Didier Semin, 'Boltanski: From the *Impossible Life* to the *Exemplary Life*,' in *Christian Boltanski*, ed. Didier Semin, Tamar Garb and Donald Kuspit (London: Phaidon, 1997), p. 60.

⁷¹⁵ Mieke Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), p.34

⁷¹⁶ Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak*, p.34.

⁷¹⁷ Rosalind Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 2,' *October* 4 (1977): 59,

⁷¹⁸ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p.101.

⁷¹⁹ Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*), p. 10.

by Margolles are non-figurative and abstract, they do *not* have an abstracting *effect* of the kind that Bal discusses.

This practice of collecting ‘samples’ of the bloody sand as in *Lote Bravo* and subsequently creating sculptures out of them—a practice that I discussed in relation to the trace—is similar to certain ethnographic fieldwork practices that Foster describes in his essay. To give another example that involves ‘deathly materials,’ the practice of finding human or animal skeletons and subsequently showcasing them in natural history museums—an institution that Gómez-Peña and Fusco critique in *Two Amerindians*—also relies on collecting samples by performing fieldwork. In *One Place After Another*, Miwon Kwon discusses Mark Dion’s artistic practices in relation to site specificity claiming that his work choreographs ‘several different definitions of the site [...] concurrently.’⁷²⁰ In his *On Tropical Nature* (1991), Dion collected several ‘samples’ he obtained from the Orinoco River in Venezuela, like mushrooms and stones, and subsequently displayed them in an art institution in Caracas trying to draw attention to cultural representations of nature.⁷²¹ Like the ‘functional site’ that James Meyer describes, works such as Dion’s, according to Kwon, are paradigmatic of a trend where the site of reception and the site of intervention occur in different spaces. Kwon claims ‘[...] although the site of action or intervention (physical) and the site of effects/ reception (discursive) are conceived to be continuous, they are nonetheless pulled apart.’⁷²² As such, the site of reception and the site of intervention are being separated in artistic practices. The adobe tombstones that Margolles creates and the items left behind by the victims of violence—like the gold chains she displayed at Venice—is also characteristic of this practice of pulling the site of intervention from the site of reception.

Dion and Gómez-Peña’s work can be placed within the history of institutional critique but I would argue that so can Margolles’ artistic practice, albeit in a different way. Of course, unlike Dion’s works or the exhibits found in natural history museums,

⁷²⁰ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 28.

⁷²¹ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p. 29.

⁷²² Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p. 30.

the objects that Margolles' morbid displays—like displaying a severed tongue—are far from being institutionalised or manifestations of established cultural representations. As such, unlike Dion, Gómez-Peña and Fusco, Margolles does not critique existing forms of museological practices. But her work does constitute a form of institutional critique in the sense that the materials and objects she displays violate the odourless, seemingly sterile and usually pristine characteristics of exhibition spaces. Additionally, as I will maintain shortly, the way in which she addresses the sense of smell, introduces an unprecedented embodied experience that transports some of the gruesome outcomes of violence from the street into the gallery space.

Indeed, another way in which Margolles proposes an alternative to normative forms of representation is by addressing the sense of smell. In 2007, she presented a work in Amsterdam entitled *Fumus Fugiens*, in which she interviewed women residing in Ciudad Juárez that, according to Margolles, lived in a permanent state of fear. She gave them t-shirts to wear for several days and asked them not to wash. 'I wanted to work with the fear that gets imbedded in clothing,' Margolles claimed, 'and is transformed into sweat, bodily oils and odor.'⁷²³ This is similar to visual artist and chemist Sissel Tolaas' *The Smell of Fear* of 2006—for this work, in a moment of fear, she distilled the sweat of fifteen men and converted this into a white emulsion with which she painted the walls of a gallery space. Leaving the rest of the gallery empty, the viewers were only confronted with a malodourous environment.⁷²⁴ Returning to Margolles, her *Vaporización* of 2001, mentioned above, also functions in a similar way, in that it seeks to invade the audience's personal space by filling the gallery space vapour, the installation wrapped visitors with a dense and humid fog whilst at the same time clouding their vision and inducing a sense of claustrophobia. Smells can also be perceived as traces. Unlike vision and audition where information is transmitted 'immaterially' via light or sound waves, in olfaction the information comes from *direct* contact with the molecules that are responsible for a particular

⁷²³ Taiyana Pimentel, 'Conversation Between Taiyana Pimentel, Teresa Margolles and Cuauhtémoc Medina,' in *Teresa Margolles: What Else Could we Talk About?* ed. Cuauhtémoc Medina (Mexico City: Editorial RM, 2009), p.85.

⁷²⁴ Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright, 'Between Art and Anthropology,' in *Between Art and Anthropology: Contemporary Ethnographic Practice*, ed. Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2010), p. 6.

smell. In other words, when we smell a cadaver or the sweat of another person, our olfactory receptors are actually making contact with the 'smelly' object.⁷²⁵

German philosopher Georg Simmel has given an apt summary of the importance of smell, especially relative to vision, in categorising and discerning the social and economic status of individuals. Crucially, he articulates the kind of intimacy created when smelling another individual:

[No] sight of the proletarian's misery [...] will overwhelm us so sensuously and directly[...] that we can smell the atmosphere of somebody is the most intimate perception of him [...] and it is obvious that with the increasing sensitiveness toward impression of smelling in general, there may occur a selection and a taking of distance, which forms, to a certain degree, one of the sentient bases for the sociological reserve of the modern individual.⁷²⁶

This thrusting together of the body of the viewer—who is in all likelihood coming from the privileged enclave of the art world—and the bodily fluids of these dispensable individuals forges an unprecedented intimacy between two distant sectors of the population, establishing contacts that otherwise are too few and far between. Here it is also useful to consider Levinas concept of the 'Other.' In his book *Time and the Other* (1947), Levinas defines the Other as:

[...] what I myself am not. The Other is this, not because of the Other's character [...] but because of the Other's very alterity. The Other is, for example, the weak, the poor [...] whereas I am the rich or the powerful.⁷²⁷

The olfactory molecules that emanate from the t-shirts that Margolles gave to the women in Juárez forces a close contact with the Other. Margolles' works are not about creating distance between subject and object; instead, her projects are a way of disallowing these nameless bodies to die alone, unrecognised and forgotten, becoming

⁷²⁵ Egon Peter Köster, 'The Specific Characteristics of the Sense of Smell,' in *Olfaction, Taste and Cognition*, ed. Catherine Rouby, Benoist Schaal, Danièle Dubois, R mi Gervais and A. Holley (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 29.

⁷²⁶ Quoted in Gale Largey and Rod Watson, 'The Sociology of Odors,' in *The Smell Culture Reader*, ed. Jim Drobnick (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), p. 33.

⁷²⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 83.

merely a number in the serial production of corpses. Her works do not represent obituaries but a means of establishing contact with the Other, as conceptualised by Levinas. Her engagement with corpses points to the presence of death that we all share regardless of our position in society. But at the same time, she underlines the singularity of the victims through the traces that they leave behind.

Remembering the ‘Other’: Liquid Fear and Olfactory Memory

In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler reminds her readers of the importance of mourning: without it, she says, ‘[...] we lose that keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence.’⁷²⁸ In this section, I will consider how Margolles’ works attempt to leave a mark on the memory of viewers. To this effect I will show that some of her works represent ‘counter-monuments’, as defined by Judaic studies professor James E. Young. In addition, I will also analyse the work of Krzysztof Wodiczko and the strategies that he employs to give visibility to the victims of violence.

The promise of singularity that the trace and the index provide, as discussed earlier, is particularly powerful when considering that the murders in the Mexican side of the border are often ‘remembered’ simply as a set of statistics. Kathleen Staudt, who has written extensively about the murdered women in Juárez, has argued that the authorities often spend more time ‘quibbling’ about the body count rather than in investigating the reasons behind these murders.⁷²⁹ One of Biemann’s interviewees in *Performing the Border* effectively underlines de-humanising effect of body counts claiming that ‘[...] it is as if the victims have no rights. They are dead so they don’t have any rights. They are a number.’ Indeed, this subject is also featured in Biemann’s *Performing the Border* when she discusses the women of Juárez. In the voiceover, Biemann states that the serial killer experiences the identity of others as a ‘matter of numbers.’ She then shows a list of murdered women, identified only by a case number, age and a description of the manner in which they were killed. In the meantime, Biemann shows black and white footage in the background of someone excavating a

⁷²⁸ Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp.Xviii-xix.

⁷²⁹ Staudt, *Violence and Activism at the Border*, p. 2.

female corpse (**Plate 5.24**). Numbers such as the ones that Biemann exposes her audience to are those of the corpses of women that were found. More disturbingly, these figures do not take into account the disappeared women that have *not* been found, lessening the 'statistical impact', to the obvious advantage of the authorities responsible. More corruptly, many reports and evidence have mysteriously gone missing. Staudt succinctly claims that 'Juárez is a numeric outlier for female homicides, but the effort to analyse precise figures is an exercise in futility.'⁷³⁰ I would add that the analysis of these 'body counts' is instrumental because the authorities deliberately manipulate them.

Historian Thomas W. Laquer, who has written about memorial practices of veteran soldiers, has claimed that naming bodies is a way of sanctifying and venerating those who have lost their lives not just in battlefields but also in civilian life. Giving a name, according to Laquer, is giving a '[...] specific placeholder for all that a person means.'⁷³¹ '[...] The fate of dead bodies and of names,' continues Laquer representing bodies in our century does tend to be part of a new, democratic, more broadly public and demanding history of persons.'⁷³²

Many theorists have pointed out that abstraction as a strategy of representation in relation to statistics and numbers tends to have a de-individualising effect. For literature professor Mark Seltzer statistics and power are intimately interlinked: 'What the conversion of individuals into numbers and cases and the conversion of bodies into visual displays correlate are two of the crucial control-technologies of machine culture: statistics and surveillance.'⁷³³ Additionally, media and communications professor Scott McQuire argues that the emergence of statistics in the 19th century had fundamentally changed the relationship between knowledge, information and matter, and has led to a distancing 'replacement of people by numbers.'⁷³⁴ Similarly, Doane maintains that statistics, when applied with political

⁷³⁰ Staudt, *Violence and Activism at the Border*, pp.33-34.

⁷³¹ Thomas W. Laquer, 'Names, Bodies, and the Anxiety of Erasure,' in *The Social and Political Body*, ed. Theodore R. Schatzki and Wolfgang Nattor (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1996), p. 126.

⁷³² Laquer, 'Names, Bodies, and the Anxiety of Erasure,' p.128.

⁷³³ Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 100.

⁷³⁴ Scott McQuire, *The Media City: Media, Architecture and Urban Space* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore: Sage Publications, 2008), p. 89.

intention to individuals, is part of an imperialist epistemology that, holding hands with a de-individualising capitalist logic, attempts to assert dominance in the face of contingency and makes it possible to define and control 'new populations.' In this particular sense, statistics, according to Doane, renounce the logic of the individual in favour of the logic of the mass. This does not deny statistics' important role in society and in science; rather, that in order for them to function effectively in the study of populations, they have to dilute individual attributes in order to create an abstract 'type.' Only individuals have a 'reality' but in demographic statistics this reality is not epistemologically valuable. 'Statistics,' asserts Doane '[...] acknowledges and tolerates individual differences by transcending [them].'⁷³⁵ Significantly, statistics was a growing recourse in the 19th century and tended to be used to pursue the obsession at the time with various forms of 'pathology', such as homosexuality and prostitution, and helped to classify groups along the lines of race, gender or nationality.⁷³⁶ The body counts that so often fill the newspaper headlines are a way of negating the individual and, consequently, decreasing public sympathy. The trace and the index in Margolles work, therefore, can be considered as a unique and singular memorial for those anonymous lives that have been lost in this violence. Even though many of the victims that she encounters in the morgue are never identified, Margolles pieces are a way of grieving and mourning these previously 'ungrievable' lives, as Butler would denominate them.

Another way in which Margolles forces her audience to remember those who have lost their life is, as I mentioned, by addressing the sense of smell, particularly relevant to memory. In a similar vein to Simmel, sociologists Gale Largey and Rod Watson have pointed out that real or perceived odours bear social meaning. They are (wrongly) associated to particular stereotyped ethnic, racial, sexual, socio-economic or otherwise marginalised groups, and are often used to measure moral purity or the lack thereof.⁷³⁷

⁷³⁵ Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, p.125.

⁷³⁶ Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, pp.125-127.

⁷³⁷ Largey and Watson, 'The Sociology of Odors,' pp-29-34.

Historically, in the late 19th and early 20th century Europe, foul odours were linked to disease.⁷³⁸ Zygmunt Bauman argues that modernity has ‘declared a war on smells’ partly as a response to the increasing spatial and social mobility that took place at the end of the 19th century.⁷³⁹ During this time, the medical discipline enforced the notion that germs and other causes of disease could be abolished. They fought death ‘tooth and nail’ by the application of human rationality, eliciting delusions of omnipotence—not dissimilar to the logic that popularised statistics. Denying the truth of mortality became an institutionalised endeavour. Horrifying events of death, according to Bauman, discredited such dreams of human control over mortality, and became something to be hidden, to be ashamed of. Keeping the odours of decomposition secluded, and avoiding the associated sights of dead bodies, became of paramount importance. Margolles’ work short-circuits this logic.⁷⁴⁰ In *What Else Could We Talk About?* of 2009, she hired someone to clean the exhibition floors at least once a day throughout the duration of the biennale with a mixture of water and blood from the murdered victims, pointing to the impossibility of ‘washing our hands’ from the bloodshed that has permeated the border **(Plate 5.25)**.

Olfactory qualities have also been important markers of cultural construction, Otherness and hygiene, as Simmel’s remark above indicates. Social anthropologist Martin F. Manalansan IV has argued that the ‘[...] immigrant body is culturally constructed to be the natural carrier and source of undesirable sensory experiences and is popularly perceived to be the site of polluting and negative olfactory signs.’⁷⁴¹ He further notes that in public health history the encouragement of personal cleanliness is also a form of exerting political power. Consonant with this argument, Žižek has also written about smells in relation to neighbours, which he defines as a person who no matter how far away physically she or he is, is always perceived as already ‘too close.’⁷⁴² Žižek further argues that the avid production of deodorants,

⁷³⁸ Sally Banes, ‘Olfactory Performances,’ *TDR* 45 (2001): 68.

⁷³⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, ‘The Sweet Scent of Decomposition,’ in *Forget Baudrillard?*, ed. Chris Rojek and Bryan S. Turner (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 24-26.

⁷⁴⁰ Bauman, ‘The Sweet Scent of Decomposition,’ pp.24-31.

⁷⁴¹ Martin F. Manalansan IV, ‘Immigrant Lives and the Politics of Olfaction in the Global City,’ in *The Smell Culture Reader*, ed. Jim Drobnick (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2006), p.41.

⁷⁴² Žižek, *Violence*, p.38.

soaps and other products that 'purify' the air can be analysed as part of a collective effort to keep neighbours physicality at bay, making them 'minimally' tolerable. A neighbour, for Žižek is a person '[...] who by definition smells [...]'⁷⁴³

In a similar vein, for Bauman, odours do not '[...]respect borderlines and do not fear border guards; they travel freely between spaces [...]'⁷⁴⁴ Elsewhere, Bauman also claims that today, '[...] the dangers and fears are [...] liquid like—or are they rather gaseous? They flow, seep, leak, [...] no walls have been invented yet to stop them, though many try hard to build them.'⁷⁴⁵ By wiping the floors at the Venice Biennale with water used to wash corpses in the morgue, as I mentioned above, Margolles exposed the viewers to a (real?) sense of possible contamination with the fluids that invisibly coat the environment.

Multiple authors have written about the link between smell and memory. Walter Benjamin in his essay about Proust has remarked that smells have the potential to evoke an involuntary memory, stating that '[...] memory [...] that no longer appear[s] singly, as images, but tell us about a whole, amorphously and formlessly, indefinitely and weightily [...]'⁷⁴⁶ Elsewhere, he remarks that '[...] The recognition of a scent [...] deeply drugs the sense of time. A scent may drown years in the odour it recalls', *i.e.* that the sense of smell has the potential to involuntarily evoke memories from the distant past.⁷⁴⁷ In a more scientific note, neurobiologist Donald A. Wilson and psychologist Richard J. Stevenson, in their book *Learning to Smell*, explain that images can be stored in short-term memory efficiently but decline in time, whereas olfactory information can be retained for extended periods.⁷⁴⁸ Moreover, scientific studies have shown that smells can be remembered unconsciously and, therefore, that olfactory

⁷⁴³ Žižek *Violence*, p. 141.

⁷⁴⁴ Bauman, 'Sweet Scent of Decomposition,' p. 24.

⁷⁴⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear* (Cambridge and Malden, 2006), p. 97.

⁷⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust,' in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 210.

⁷⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,' in *Selected Writings 1938-1940*, ed Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings and trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 180.

⁷⁴⁸ Donald A. Wilson and Richard J. Stevenson, *Learning to Smell: Olfactory Perception from Neurobiology to Behavior* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 196

memory is often obtained without any intention of learning.⁷⁴⁹ All of this suggests that the olfactory elements in Margolles' work are more likely to be remembered by viewers than, for example, one of the myriad of gruesome images depicting a drug cartel execution. Professor of psychology Egon Peter Köster also maintains that olfactory memories are more 'emotional' than visual memories, perhaps due to their 'penetrative' qualities.⁷⁵⁰

Crucially, Sally Banes, a dance historian who has written about the use of aromas in the theatre, indicates that in recent years there has been a renewed interest in performances that contain an olfactory quality, revealing the theatre's anxiety toward odourless mass media.⁷⁵¹ Indeed, according to Constance Classen, David Howes and Anthony Synnott, authors of a book entitled *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*, one of the reasons why smell is in notable absence in the postmodern world is our increasing physical proximity to the screens of television and computers—for reasons related to both leisure and work—rather than to other 'smelly' human beings.⁷⁵² Margolles, by involving the sense of smell in her works, goes against the grain of the logic of 'sterility' that we have become so accustomed to. Her work offers a potent critique of mass media and its distancing effects that altogether avoid 'physical proximity.'

Bad smells, then, are often perceived as an involuntary invasion into the personal space of an individual—their intangibility and lack of boundaries uncovers our lack of control and power over the environment. In line with Bauman, the very 'invisibility' of these smells, their penetrative characteristics, make them paradigmatic of today's fears. Also, this fear of 'penetrability' to which Margolles exposes us, encapsulates many of the fears that frame the conflicts and tensions in the Mexico-U.S. border. Cultural studies professor Sara Ahmed poetically claims that:

⁷⁴⁹ Köster, 'The Specific Characteristics of the Sense of Smell,' p.31.

⁷⁵⁰ Köster, 'The Specific Characteristics of the Sense of Smell,' p.32.

⁷⁵¹ Banes, 'Olfactory Performances,' p. 73.

⁷⁵² Constance Classen, David Howes and Anthony Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 203.

[...] the nation's borders and defenses are like skin; they are soft, weak, porous and easily shaped or even bruised by the proximity of others. It suggests that the nation is made vulnerable to abuse by its very openness to others [...] The demand is that the nation should seal itself from others, if it is to act on behalf of its citizens, rather than react to the claims of immigrants and other others.⁷⁵³

Thus, we can think of works such as *Fumus Fugiens* and *Vaporización* as shoring up fears surrounding the coherence of the nation-state, by underlining the penetrability not only of the human body but also of the larger body of the nation-state itself.

In relation to bodily fluids, Bauman also discusses 'liquid fear', an aspect of the dread towards any manifestation of the materiality of bodies that all humans share. Elizabeth Grosz eloquently illustrates this in her book *Volatile Bodies*:

Body fluids attest to the permeability of the body, its necessary dependence on an outside, its liability to collapse into this outside (this is what death implies), to the perilous division between the body's inside and outside [...] They attest to a certain irreducible 'dirt' or disgust, a horror of the unknown or the unspecifiable that permeates, lurks, lingers, and at times leaks out of the body, a testimony of the fraudulence or impossibility of the 'clean' and 'proper' [...] They are engulfing difficult to be rid of; any separation from them is not a matter of certainty [...] Body fluids flow, they seep, they infiltrate; their control is a matter of vigilance, never guaranteed [...] ⁷⁵⁴

The bodily fluids displayed in Margolles work invade the observer's personal space, and by doing so they underline the status of these marginalized bodies as individual bodies rather than invisible sections of the population. Visitors to *What Else Could We Talk About?* are seemingly engulfed in bodily fluids—the ground they step on has been 'cleaned' with tainted water and blood and dirt covers the walls, creating an

⁷⁵³ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p.2.

⁷⁵⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 193-194.

Here Grosz is making reference to French philosopher Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, which she examines theoretically in her long essay *Powers of Horror* originally written in French in 1980. In this essay she claims that 'Refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids[...] are what life withstands[...] There, I am the border of my condition as a living being.' [Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 3].

inescapable environment that evokes a visceral response of disgust if not fear. Although this encounter is deeply uncomfortable, it forces a close and intimate encounter with the Levinasian 'other.' Social theorist Brian Massumi argues that, under the conditions of late capitalism, power and force are always waged against an elusive, invisible enemy.⁷⁵⁵ This elusive and invisible enemy is eerily sensed throughout Margolles' works at Venice, that forced the audience to tread on bodily fluids. These works foreclose any possibility of asserting power over the environment.

Narrating Violence and Building Counter-Monuments

In this last section I will discuss the notion of the 'counter-monument' and the value of narratives as alternative strategies of representing 'systemic violence.' For this I will delve predominantly, but not exclusively, into the works of Polish artist Krzysztof Wodiczko. There is a vast amount of scholarship that focuses on the value of testimonies of witnesses, concomitant with a growing interest in the politics of trauma, especially in relation to Holocaust survivors. Personal narratives have featured strongly in many of the works that I have discussed throughout this dissertation. My analysis of violence at the borderlands would be incomplete without returning to those works that try to critically assess violence through personal narratives. Ursula Biemann in *Performing the Border* and Chantal Akerman in *From the Other Side*, both heavily use interviews and personal narratives to create their intricate and multi-layered videos. As I have mentioned earlier, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, in both his performances and his writings, also narrates and gives voice to members of the public who wish to speak out. As such, it seems crucial to me to understand what type of knowledge or information these personal narratives provide. Additionally, I will focus on the intersection between testimony and the visual characteristics of the 'counter-monument' in relation to the work of both Wodiczko and Margolles.

⁷⁵⁵ Brian Massumi, 'Everywhere You Want to Be: Introduction to Fear,' in *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 23.

Throughout this chapter I have concentrated on forms of criticism that engage with violence at the borderlands but without resorting to photojournalistic images. Personal narratives are a way of eluding such representations whilst fostering empathy for the victims. Although certain forms of personal narratives can fall into a kind of passive victimhood, they can also form a vital platform for protest. Kalí Tal has stated that:

Bearing witness is an aggressive act. It is born out of refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict [...] Its goal is change. If survivors retain control over the interpretation of their trauma, they can sometimes force a shift in the social and political structure.⁷⁵⁶

That narratives can be a valuable form of protest, of the kind that Tal articulates, is amply exemplified by some of the interviews conducted by Akerman, Biemann and Wodiczko. Various academics have underlined that trauma cannot be captured by conventional means of representation or indeed language. As Jenny Edkins, author of *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, has succinctly put it: '[...] the language we speak is part of the social order, and when the order falls apart around our ears, so does language. What we *can* say no longer makes sense; what we *want* to say, we can't. There are no words for it.'⁷⁵⁷ Indeed, as Slavoj Žižek writes:

The essence of the trauma is precisely that it is too horrible to be remembered, to be integrated into our symbolic universe. All we have to do is to mark repeatedly the trauma as such, in its very impossibility [...] *Encircle* again and again the site of the lost Thing, to *mark* it in its very impossibility [...]⁷⁵⁸

In a similar vein, psychologist Jens Brockmeier, who has written extensively on trauma, concludes that one of the crucial elements that characterise a traumatic

⁷⁵⁶ Tal, *Worlds of Hurt*, p.7.

⁷⁵⁷ Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.8.

⁷⁵⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London, Verso, 1991), p.272.

experience is that it persistently fails to be captured by any common forms or modes of representation, including linguistic and photographic ones. Linear narrative, continuity and other forms of storytelling are inadequate when dealing with an elusive and almost incomprehensible experience that cannot be bounded within normative conceptions of either temporality or logic. As such, unconventional or experimental forms of representation might be the most adequate approach when dealing with victims of violence.⁷⁵⁹

Wodiczko's work has always been concerned with those individuals who are often overlooked in the socio-political fabric of urban places, with the figure of the homeless and, more relevant for this chapter, with that of the immigrant. The people featured in his work are not dissimilar to those of Margolles' subjects: they lead precarious lives often overlooked or deliberately dismissed by governmental and juridical bodies and implicitly classified as expendable bodies. Comparing Wodiczko's and Margolles' work is useful in unpacking some of the ways in which these invisible bodies can have a say in the current political system, given the failure of normative photojournalistic and journalistic practices to do so.

Wodiczko first started his series of projections that reflected on the disenfranchised status of the homeless in the winter of 1986. In his work entitled *Homeless Projection: A Proposal for Union Square*, he projected large-scale images onto four notable 'patriotic' monuments—such as the George Washington statue erected in 1856 that symbolises the freedom made possible after the War of Independence—in New York City's well-known Union Square Park.⁷⁶⁰ This was a response to the real estate re-development and general gentrification programme that was occurring in this area in the mid-1980s, triggered by the creation of luxury apartment buildings. At the time many homeless people, deemed 'unsightly' by the responsible authorities, were evicted from the streets of Union Square in the name of 'revitalizing' the park.⁷⁶¹

⁷⁵⁹ Jens Brockmeier, 'Language, Experience and the "Traumatic Gap,"' in *Health, Illness and Culture: Broken Narratives*, ed. Lars-Christer Hydén and Jens Brockmeier (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 28-29.

⁷⁶⁰ Rosalyn Deutsche, 'Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Homeless Projection* and the Site of Urban "Revitalization,"' in *Krzysztof Wodiczko*, ed. Duncan McCorquodale (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2011), pp.127-129.

⁷⁶¹ Fred Evans, 'Citizenship Art and the Voices of the City: Wodiczko's *The Homeless Projection*,' in *Acts of Citizenship*, ed. Engin F. Isin & Greg M. Nielsen (London and New York; Zed Books, 2008), p.234.

The images projected onto the monuments consisted of trivial objects that, for Wodiczko, were examples of the items commonly owned by the homeless such as a shopping cart, a head bandage, a crutch and a wheelchair. Other projections sought to transform the heroic statues by attempting to modify their gestures or clothing in such a way that they would be reminiscent of the survival strategies that people with no fixed address are forced to employ.⁷⁶² The purpose was to reveal the hypocritical relationship between the so-called values of democracy and freedom—together with the rampant capitalism and real estate development—and the manner in which the homeless are left without any kind of representation and, of course, shelter. In this way, like Margolles, Wodiczko is interested in representing those precarious lives who are victims of the systemic violence that Žižek describes.

During the early 1990s, Wodiczko started focusing on the figure of the immigrant. In 1993 in Barcelona Wodiczko created his first *Alien Staff* (**Plate 5.26**) that consisted of a futuristic walking stick that contained a camera, a video screen as well as a loudspeaker. He created several of this high-tech objects and distributed them to a number of immigrants who subsequently used the staff to tell stories of their past. The bottom of the staff consisted of a container where the immigrants could place significant objects such as rejected visa applications, old photographs or any other object of personal value. This was intended to foreground the 'Otherness' of the person holding the staff, thus overcoming the quotidian dimension of urban life, whilst at the same time propitiating a verbal encounter between strangers.⁷⁶³ In 1999 Wodiczko said: 'Historically, the city has always been a hope for the displaced. And today, as it was in the past, our cities are worth nothing and will be condemned to destruction if they cannot open themselves to strangers.'⁷⁶⁴ This resonates with Zygmunt Bauman's claim that there has been a widespread 'civil indifference' that

⁷⁶² Deutsche, 'Krzysztof Wodiczko's *Homeless Projection*,' pp-129-130

⁷⁶³ Silvija Jestrovic, 'Exiles and the City: Krzysztof Wodiczko's New York Interventions of Making the Familiar Strange,' in *Performance, Exile and 'America'*, ed. Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 246-248.

⁷⁶⁴ Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles: Writings, Projects, Interviews* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), p. 6.

characterises contemporary society that in turn 'de-ethicalises' interpersonal relationships.⁷⁶⁵

Wodiczko works regarding the borderlands were created over a decade apart. The first was in 1988 when he made a two-part video projection in both San Diego and Tijuana entitled *The Border Projection* (**Plates 5.27 and 5.28**). In San Diego, in a museum now called the San Diego Museum of Man—which is dedicated to the commemoration and glorification of Spanish colonial history and decorated in 18th century Mexican ecclesiastical architecture style—he projected, at the sides of the building, images of hands holding luxurious eating utensils poised as if they were waiting for dinner to arrive. In stark contrast, on the bell tower of the building, he displayed manacled hands holding a sumptuous bowl of fruit. The following night, Wodiczko crossed the border and projected on the walls of the Centro Cultural de Tijuana—which was built in 1982 in order to celebrate Mexican heritage—again a pair of hands, but these were wrapped around the back of a man's head as if he were positioning himself for arrest.⁷⁶⁶ The contrast between, on the one hand, an opulent consumer waiting to be served by manacled hands and, on the other, a man positioning himself to be arrested, reveals the power of symbolic structures: the link between California's economy and illegal immigration; San Diego's colonial past; and the neo-colonial relationship between Mexico and the United States.

Wodiczko's second project occurred in two evenings in 2001 under the auspices of InSite, again in the Centro Cultural de Tijuana. For this work, Wodiczko attached a camera, with the use of a complex helmet, to the heads of six maquiladora women in such a way as to obtain a video of their faces, which subsequently he projected it onto the spherical cinema complex of the building (**Plate 5.29**). The projections resulted in almost deformed if not hallucinatory faces. Simultaneously, the audience could hear these women, who had come mostly from poor rural areas in Mexico, narrating their personal stories of loss, sexual maltreatment, rape, work exploitation and other various abuses of power, perpetrated mainly by men. Planning

⁷⁶⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, 'Effacing the Face: On the Social Management of Moral Proximity,' *Theory Culture and Society* 7 (1990), pp.5-38.

⁷⁶⁶ Patricia C. Phillips, 'Images of Repossession,' in *Public Address: Krzysztof Wodiczko*, ed. Phil Freshman (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1992), pp. 44-46.

for this project started a year before it was projected. Wodiczko carefully chose his six participants, and asked them to come together over the space of a year, in order to talk about their traumatic experiences and get comfortable doing so. Wodiczko denominated this process a 'psychological evolution' that, in many ways, is not dissimilar to the concept of group therapy.⁷⁶⁷

The restorative aspects and political potential of testimonies have been well documented by many academics, including psychiatrist Dori Laub and literary critic Shoshana Felman in their seminal book *Testimony* (1992), which focuses on the narratives of Holocaust survivors. Laub maintains that testimonies have the potential to resist nostalgia and 'ongoing repetitious embattlements with the past', and helps the narrators face loss through a process of repetition and enunciation.⁷⁶⁸

George Yúdice, who participated in the theoretical and curatorial project of InSite 2000, states that this 'group therapy' aspect of Wodiczko's work has led critics to compare it with popular talk shows.⁷⁶⁹ But contrary to the entertainment value of popular talk shows, the public nature and scale of Wodiczko's work suggests a political agenda that extends well beyond the individual pain and into collective and political suffering. Wearing the prosthetic devices for speech that Wodiczko designed—the helmets with the attached camera—the women not only projected their narratives into a public space but also, in a sense, *wore* these projections in a way that allowed them to expand their otherwise subjugated corporeality and voice into a vast public arena.⁷⁷⁰ Wodiczko claimed that he wished '[...] to give visibility and voice, through the use of advanced mediatized technologies' to women who worked in the maquiladora industry in Tijuana,' much in the same way he did in *Alien Staff* in Barcelona.⁷⁷¹

⁷⁶⁷ George Yúdice, 'Public and Violence,' in *Artistic Citizenship: A Public Voice for the Arts*, ed. Mary Schmidt Campbell and Randy Martin (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), p. 157.

⁷⁶⁸ Dori Laub, 'An Event Without A Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival,' in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 91.

⁷⁶⁹ Yúdice, 'Public and Violence,' p.158.

⁷⁷⁰ Luiza Nader, 'Migratory Subjects: Memory Work in Krzysztof Wodiczko's Projections and Instruments,' in *Memory and Migration: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies*, ed. Julia Creet and Andreas Kitzmann (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2011), pp. 250-255.

⁷⁷¹ Quoted in Yúdice, 'Public and Violence,' p. 157.

According to sociologist Catherine Kohler Riessman, who has written extensively on the epistemological value of narrative analysis, people that participate in the act of storytelling do so because they believe that their narration can have an effect on social interaction—and can often be used as a tool for organizing identity groups—that other forms of communication and information lack.⁷⁷² According to her history of narrative inquiry, during the 1960s there was a negative reaction towards empirical and supposedly objective forms of social research. This reaction was sparked by the emergence of ‘identity movements’—emancipation and equality advocates of numerous ‘minority groups’—and by the ‘therapeutic boom’ that facilitated personal life stories becoming valuable objects of investigation. During the 1970s, narratives from victims of violence became increasingly important and conspicuous with the creation of the Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale University in 1979, which consisted of numerous video interviews of Holocaust survivors.⁷⁷³ Other important factors that contributed to the ‘narrative turn’ at this time included advances in technologies such as relatively inexpensive portable cameras and recording devices. For media academic John Ellis, the act of witnessing has become the pivotal form of communication in modern media and television: ‘[...]the co-presence of the television image was developing a distinct form of witness. Witnessing became a domestic act [...] Television sealed the twentieth century’s fate as the century of the witness.’⁷⁷⁴ Wodiczko’s works bring increased visibility to these testimonies, but a visibility that exists outside television and the institutions of popular media and, instead, spreads through public spaces.

More recently, scholars have remarked on the importance of testimonies regarding state sponsored violence in Latin American. Joannna R. Bartow, who has carried out substantial work on the value of *testimonios* in this region, suggests that personal narratives are often used to construct collective narratives, commonly

⁷⁷² Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore: Sage Publications, 2008), pp.7-10.

⁷⁷³ Mark Jarzombek, ‘The Post-Traumatic Turn and the Art of Walid Ra’ad and Krzysztof Wodiczko: From Theory to Trope and Beyond,’ in *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, ed. Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2006), p. 257.

⁷⁷⁴ John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), p.32.

embedded within a human rights discourse.⁷⁷⁵ In the current situation in Mexico, however, the decentralized nature of violence obstructs the possibility of a clear comparison with *testimonios*, but there is still an urgent need to situate the violence in the borderlands also within a human rights discourse. Domínguez-Ruvalcaba has argued that in Mexico many regard television as a substitute for the courtroom, since the police and juridical forces very often collude with drug cartels and other perpetrators of violence.⁷⁷⁶ Even though many murders have witnesses, few dare to speak out for fear of reprisal through juridical and governmental channels but they can speak before an 'abstract multitude.' He adds that 'personal testimony takes the form of an expression of grievance.'⁷⁷⁷

Other critics have argued that the individual testimony is, in essence, a collective expression that can ultimately lead to social justice. Sociologist Srila Roy, who has studied at length the subject, has written:

In the transformation of personal pain into social suffering, the witness is transposed from one that embodies personal trauma to a metaphor of collective violence and suffering [...] Testimony is, in the final instance, a speech act that draws its meaning from a collective, plural 'us' rather than the 'I' who is in pain.⁷⁷⁸

This is consonant with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'minor literature' as they discuss it in their book *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1975). In spite of being in some way marginalised, 'minor literature' can become, under the right circumstances, revolutionary. According to the philosophers, in 'minor literature' any 'individual enunciation' is automatically a part of a 'collective enunciation.' They add that minor literature can be considered as an assemblage whereby the '[...]minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature

⁷⁷⁵ Joanna R. Bartow, *Subject to Change: The Lessons of Latin American Women's Testimonio for Truth, Fiction and Theory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), pp.11-12.

⁷⁷⁶ Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, 'Death on the Screen,' pp.70-72.

⁷⁷⁷ Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, 'Death on the Screen,' p. 72.

⁷⁷⁸ Quoted from an unpublished paper in Molly Andrews, 'Beyond Narrative: The Shape of Traumatic Testimony,' in *Beyond Narrative Coherence*, ed. Matti Hyvärinen, Lars-Christer Hydén, Marja Saarenheimo and Maria Tamboukou (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2010), p. 150.

within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature.’⁷⁷⁹ Several of the artists I have discussed throughout this dissertation have used Deleuze and Guattari’s concept to buttress the political potency of their work. Emily Hicks of the BAW/TAF, for instance, discusses this concept in her aforementioned book *Border Writing* and, more recently, Chantal Akerman has even described her own work as ‘minor cinema.’⁷⁸⁰

There is an inherent problem in considering the narratives of Wodiczko’s interviewees—victims of violence at the borderlands—that Giorgio Agamben clearly points out in his book *Remnants of Auschwitz*. The problem is not only that, as Brockmeier points out, trauma resists representation, but also that the ultimate witnesses—those who lost their lives—cannot speak. Analysing the figure of the witness in relation to the writings of Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi, Agamben claims that Holocaust survivors ‘[...] bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to.’⁷⁸¹ Agamben maintains that the ultimate witnesses of the Holocaust have lost their lives and so any information that we obtain from survivors who have enjoyed the privilege of living—although very valuable—inevitably has a stark lacuna. ‘The “true” witnesses’ maintains Agamben, ‘[...] are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness.’⁷⁸² Crucially, Agamben continues:

[...] Language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness. The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language, to the point of taking on a different insignificance—that of the complete witness, that of he who by definition cannot bear witness [...] The speech of language is born where language is no longer in the beginning, where language falls away from it simply to bear witness.⁷⁸³

⁷⁷⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 18.

⁷⁸⁰ Marion Schmid, *Chantal Akerman* (Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2010), p.6.

⁷⁸¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p. 13.

⁷⁸² Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, pp.33-34.

⁷⁸³ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.39.

Returning to Margolles, her work attempts to fill this gap and indeed give ‘ultimate witnesses’ a non-verbal presence in the current socio-political fabric that, inevitably, Wodiczko’s interviewees cannot provide. In this sense, the political impact of her work exists outside of language.

What Margolles’ and Wodiczko’s works do share, however, is that they try to remember those who have suffered or lost their lives in the violence that marks the borderlands. Comparative literature professor Andreas Huyssen in his book *Present Pasts* has identified a trend in the 1990s—in the work of artists such as Polish artist Mirosław Balka and Doris Salcedo—to create what he calls ‘memory sculpture.’ Memory sculpture incorporates a powerful corporeal dimension and invokes lived memory. Mostly embracing a post-minimalist aesthetic and carried out in installation form, these works go against the logic of nationally sponsored monuments and serve to counteract the numbing effects facilitated by mass media.⁷⁸⁴ These works, for Huyssen, problematize linear notions of memory and are self-critical about their function to *re-present* and *re-collect*. Although Huyssen does not mention Margolles or Wodiczko in his book, many of the characteristics of their work are congruous with Huyssens descriptions.

I have borrowed the notion of ‘counter-monuments’ that English and Judaic Studies Professor James E. Young has developed in order to show how the work of both Margolles and Wodiczko—although radically different from each other—attempt to challenge systemic violence at the Mexico-U.S. border. Young claims that monuments—particularly when nationally sponsored—often try to substitute the actual process of remembering for physical memorials and, consequently, they can ‘[...] spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget[...]’ such events.⁷⁸⁵ ‘The counter-monument accomplishes what all monuments must, maintains Young, ‘it

⁷⁸⁴ Andreas Huyssen, ‘Doris Salcedo’s Memory Sculpture: Unland: The Orphan’s Tunic,’ in *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, ed. Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp.110-111.

⁷⁸⁵ James E. Young, ‘The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today,’ in *Art and the Public Sphere*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 55.

reflects back to the people—and thus codifies—their own memorial projections and preoccupations.’⁷⁸⁶

Turning to Margolles’ work, the banners in *What Else Could We Talk About?*, which were almost paraded in the streets of Venice like substitutes of national flags, act as ‘counter-monuments.’ These works were meant to be warnings against the notion that the sovereign state—both Mexico and the United States—protects all its citizens fairly and impartially. Significantly, she also placed blood stained fabrics of executed people at the entrance of the United States pavilion at the Venice Biennale in order to point out the complicity of that country in Mexico’s drug war (**Plate 5.30**). This is not just because the United States is the most important consumer of these drugs, allowing this highly lucrative activity to flourish illicitly, but also because the legal weapons purchased in that country (including semi-automatics which can be easily altered to create fully automatic weapons) often cross illegally into Mexico, thus providing the tools used by the cartels to fight each other cartels as well as the government.⁷⁸⁷ In fact, during the spring of 2009—a few months before the opening of Margolles’ show at the Venice Biennale—then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton admitted the U.S. role in fuelling the drug war, stating that ‘We know very well that the drug traffickers are motivated by the demand for illegal drugs in the United States and that they are armed by the transport of weapons from the United States.’⁷⁸⁸ Thus, Margolles’ intervention at the U.S. pavilion can be considered as a ‘counter-monument’, contributing to a dialogue that was gaining potency at that time, centred on the United States’ role in fuelling the drug war.

Young’s reading aptly summarises Wodiczko’s numerous ‘counter-monuments’ in the form of video-projections on buildings. Wodiczko’s works are a critical analysis of monuments and buildings as vehicles for authority. In fact, Wodiczko maintains — in the same line as Young, who also foregrounds the ephemerality of the ‘counter-monument’—that ‘[...] when the projectors are switched off there is another

⁷⁸⁶ Young, ‘The Counter-Monument,’ p. 65.

⁷⁸⁷ Grillo, *El Narco*, p.215.

⁷⁸⁸ Quoted in Jo Tuckman , ‘Hillary Clinton admits US role in Mexico Drug Wars ,’ *The Guardian*, March 26th 2009. Date accessed: January 25th 2013.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/mar/26/mexico-hillary-clinton-drugs-weapons>

projection starting. The absence of the image is often more powerful than when it was there, it can have a more lasting effect than if the image were carved there [...].⁷⁸⁹ This also resonates with Beuys' aforementioned notion of the counter-image. The transitory quality of the 'counter-monument' is consonant with Jenny Edkins claim that, in order to adequately mark trauma without forcing it to undergo through a process of gentrification—i.e. by means of a coherent, logical and linear narrative—we need to change our concept of time.⁷⁹⁰ Memorialisation can retain '[...]the trace of another notion of temporality.'⁷⁹¹

This is what Wodiczko's works do: by going against the grain of monolithic concepts of nationally sponsored monuments, they reveal the traumatic process without 'domesticating' it. They engage with narrative (he gives his interviewees time to 'practice' before speaking in public) without succumbing to its logic (his work 'flashes up' in the urban fabric) and thus open up an arena for political contestation. Margolles' work, on the other hand, commemorates those precarious lives without passively paying melancholic tribute to the victims. Instead, she attempts to make their lost lives still relevant and to transform them into a political force in contemporary affairs.

Conclusion

Do Margolles' works constitute a transgressive strategy that is an affront to the memory of the deceased? Or do her works radically close the distance between those who have been afflicted by violence and those who merely observe it from the sidelines, often through photography or moving images? There is no doubt that Margolles' methods are riddled with ethical question marks. But despite and even because of this, her works do offer an innovative form of representing violence that exploits rather than disguises the inherent violence in representing violence and tests the limits of cultural permissibility. Indeed, there are, in my view, no representations

⁷⁸⁹ Quoted in Peter Boswell, 'Krzysztof Wodiczko: Art and the Public Domain,' in *Public Address: Krzysztof Wodiczko*, ed. Phil Freshman (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1992), p. 20.

⁷⁹⁰ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p.15.

⁷⁹¹ Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, p.15.

of violence that do not cross ethical boundaries. Representing violence inevitably involves committing another act of violence that satisfies voyeuristic pleasures; despite our best intentions, violence stubbornly latches on to us when we try and give it 'visibility' and understand its mechanisms whether by a click of a camera or, like Margolles, by using the very materiality of death. Violence is as oozy, sticky and formless not unlike the materials Margolles employs in her works. Very graphic representations of violence (often dubbed 'pornography of violence') can be critiqued for their role in theatrically seducing a voyeuristic fascination whereas too abstract works that often point to the 'unrepresentability' of death and suffering can be attacked on the grounds that it addresses violence too obliquely—and therefore problematically—often aestheticising it to the point of evacuating political meaning. But this does not mean we should abstain from representing it or devise innovative models—like Margolles' works—that raise political awareness, nurture empathy and seek to understand the mechanisms that allow violence to flourish under the current conditions of economic globalisation. Derrida was right when he claimed that '[...] every philosophy of nonviolence can only choose the lesser violence within an *economy of violence*.'⁷⁹² It is perhaps by choosing a more violent and disruptive means of representation that we can find strategies to disable those forms that have already become naturalised. The process and materials behind her work shine a spotlight on the greater violence within this economy: the relations of power that have created 'disposable bodies' in the first place. Her works expose the lack of rights of the murdered subjects, and form a powerful ethico-political critique of neoliberalism's disregard for human life.

Undoubtedly, the most urgent and pressing problem that the borderlands now face is violence. My primary aim in this chapter has been to think about a number of strategies adopted by a select group of artists to confront this problem. These artists have endeavoured to find alternative ways of representing violence, to infuse their subjects with political power and to avoid apathetic acceptance of a socio-political fabric that has tragically been marked by an overwhelming amount of violence. These

⁷⁹²Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 1978), p.400.

strategies are particularly valuable since traditional forms of representation have been rendered ineffective for this purpose or have otherwise been compromised and significantly impaired.

The strategies followed by Margolles address the sense of smell and make use of bodily materials in order to force audiences into a singular encounter with the victims of violence, exposing them directly to the source of 'contamination.' By working with the traces of victims, her goal is to both mourn and remember those unprotected and under-represented lives. She does not adhere to the traditional methods of representation but rather, much more aggressively, places the audiences in contact with the very materiality of death. Personal narratives and interviews—like those conducted by Wodiczko, Biemann and Akerman—not only shed light on the underlying causes for violence but, crucially, also pressure us to reflect on the problems of representing it. The counter-monuments that both Wodiczko and Margolles create fit Young's description of the 'counter-monument': they actually provoke rather than console; problematize meaning rather than congeal it; demand interaction rather than passive observation; and most importantly, they are self-reflective about their function to commemorate.

Conclusion

The works that I have discussed engage with a trend that Miwon Kwon identified in *One Place After Another* where she claims that site-oriented practices in contemporary art have displayed an expanded concern with ‘nonart’ issues, spaces and institutions.⁷⁹³ I have developed my own genealogy of site-oriented practices and pointed out that, since the 1980s, artists have been preoccupied with geopolitical debates surrounding the category of the nation-state whilst zooming in on the Mexico-U.S. border. As well as benefitting from the trend that Kwon identified, the interest in this border on the part of artists I examine also greatly benefited from, drew on and contributed to the ‘spatial turn’ that I discussed in the introduction as well as from the writings of academics—like Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1983)—who were dismantling established but hermetic notions of the nation-state. If, like the work of Andrea Fraser and Fred Wilson that I discussed in the second chapter, other site-oriented practices underlined the power structures that frame diverse institutions, including art and natural history museums, the artists that I have discussed ambitiously extended their site of investigation to include the much larger institution of the nation-state. Due to their interest in and critique of the institution of the nation-state, throughout *Geographies of Violence*, I have paid ample attention to the theoretical tools enabled by institutional critique. I have also historicised the term ‘site-specificity’—especially as analysed in the writings of Kwon but also of James Meyer in his essay ‘The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity’—often in relation to the ‘ethnographic turn’ that was articulated by Hal Foster in 1995 in ‘The Artist as Ethnographer.’

To Kwon and Meyer’s genealogy of site-specificity, I have woven the development of the ‘documentary turn’ that, like both Biemann and Akerman’s work, interrogates ‘nonart’ geopolitical concerns in relation to issues of site and the nation-state. My interpretive model, by grouping these diverse artists together, aids the

⁷⁹³ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2002), p.24.

project of rethinking site-oriented practices in such a way that cuts across a variety of media and takes into account the development of the 'documentary turn' that has been largely kept apart from the history of other avant-garde art practices. In other words, I argue that the theoretical framework of the notion of site-oriented practices is useful in engaging with a wider variety of mediums that has so far been acknowledged.

All of the five chapters start with and weave a reflection of violence advanced by a number of theorists. My point of departure for thinking about violence in relation to the Mexico-U.S. border has been Étienne Balibar's writings. According to Balibar, borders, as systems of exclusion *par excellence*, exert violence in a variety of ways.⁷⁹⁴ I have looked at various types and mechanisms of violence: lopsided views of a diverse set of relationships, leading to partial and blinkered historical narratives that have created and reinforced patriotic and bigoted nationalistic sentiments; the nation-state's exclusory mechanisms articulated in terms of identity and ethnicity; marketing strategies for deliberately deploying 'othering' practices, maintaining if not promoting divisions that operate along the axes of race and ethnicity; ruthless working conditions in sweatshops that feed and sustain Mexican and American economic relations at the expense of securing adequate living and working conditions for citizen workers; an unexplained femicide that has taken the lives of hundred of women living and working in assembly plants in the Mexican border town of Ciudad Juárez that, at best, was overlooked and treated negligently by the authorities; increased militarisation of the border forcing migrants to look for more dangerous crossings, costing the lives of many; and, more recently, blood spilling over the so-called 'drug war' that, although soothing the often irritated relations between the two countries, has led to almost 70,000 deaths since its inception in 2006, mostly on the Mexican side. Especially in relation to the work of Teresa Margolles, I have also discussed the violence inherent in representing it.

In the first two chapters I explore how performance art can be conceived as constitutive of site-specificity's genealogy and how the performances of the BAW/TAF

⁷⁹⁴ Étienne Balibar, 'Violence, Ideality and Cruelty,' in *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans. Christine Jones, James Swenson and Chris Turner (London and New York: 2002), p.138.

and Gómez-Peña comprise a valuable exploration of spatial politics and practices. I start the first chapter by looking at the relationship between historical narratives and violence through Jacques Derrida's assertion that 'All nation-states have violent origins [...].'⁷⁹⁵ In the opening chapter, I extensively analyse the BAW/TAF's *The End of the Line* (1986) since the performance critiques the violent creation of the Mexico-U.S. border as well as the historical narratives that operate along the lines of exclusion that consolidate and maintain its legitimacy. Bringing into play the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on the carnivalesque and Homi Bhabha's notion of the performative temporality of the nation-state, I illustrated the way in which the members of the BAW/TAF advanced a new way of narrating history, one that attempted to debunk the neo-colonialist fantasy that America was 'discovered.' David Ávalos usefully proposed to look at the Mexico-U.S. border as a Möbius strip since this geometrical figure is impossible to orient having 'no other side.' Instead of dismantling the ideological underpinnings of the places where art was exhibited, like other site-oriented practices, the members of this collective launched an ambitious attack on the cultural and political inscriptions of the wider space of the nation-state. This reflects a concern identified by Kwon where artists were rejecting and expanding established definitions of site and space.⁷⁹⁶ Amongst others, I related the practice of the BAW/TAF within 'new genre public art' that Kwon extensively engages with in relation to the genealogy of site-oriented practices. But unlike Kwon's account of 'new genre public art' that focuses on artists responding to a particular urban area, I examine artists concerned with the wider space of the nation-state.

Moving to the work of Gómez-Peña, for the second chapter, I looked at the relationship between violence, identity and borders as systems of exclusion. I discussed the way in which Gloria Anzaldúa describes the Mexico-U.S. border not only as a space, but also as a psychic wound. I also considered Balibar's argument that, in order to understand the structural violence inherent in nationalist ideologies, we need to consider the exclusory formation of collective identities. I argued that Gómez-

⁷⁹⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'The Deconstruction of Actuality,' in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews (1971-2001)*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 115.

⁷⁹⁶ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p.108.

Peña's performances engaged with the border as a spatial trope that exerts its power in numerous contexts. I embedded his performances within site-oriented practices by contextualising his work within the 'ethnographic turn' and the history of institutional critique. Amplifying the powerful theoretical framework of site-specificity, I argued that performance art has largely been left out of the dominant narratives of site-oriented practices written by Kwon, Meyer and Foster. Amongst others, I discussed how Gómez-Peña joint performance with Coco Fusco, *The Couple in the Cage* (1992), critiqued colonial and neo-colonialist fantasies of the 'discovery of America' and exposed a vast array of museological displays that sustained ethnographic paradigms of discovery. Adopting some of Pierre Bourdieu's theories regarding opinion polls and comparing Gómez-Peña's use of them to those of Hans Haacke—who was also preoccupied with the power structures that frame institutions—I looked at Gómez-Peña's ethnographic methods of measuring public opinion. These included using his own opinion polls; replicating certain methods used by journalists; and using comedy in order to study the reactions and responses of his audience.

By discussing Meyer's 'The Functional Site,' I maintained that Gómez-Peña's work engages with the functional site since he conceives of the border—the site of intervention—as portable and mobile, performing it in a myriad of locations, ranging from streets to well-known institutions, like the Smithsonian. Although Meyer does not discuss the history of performance art in relation to site-specificity, I maintain that his concept of the 'functional site' is useful in unpacking Gómez-Peña's performance based work since it also operates 'within a network of sites[...and] engage[s] several sites, institutions, and collaborators at once[...]' ⁷⁹⁷ For Gómez-Peña, to borrow Kwon's words, the site is a 'discursive vector' that is ungrounded and fluid.⁷⁹⁸ In Gómez-Peña's works, the Mexico-U.S. border is not conceived solely as a spatial geographical container but as present and ubiquitous in a variety of violent systems of exclusion. I also examined Foster's 'The Artist as Ethnographer' claiming that he crucially underlined the pitfalls of what he deemed to be an 'ethnographic envy' on the part of

⁷⁹⁷ James Meyer, 'The Functional Site; or, The Transformation of Site Specificity,' in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp.25-28.

⁷⁹⁸ Kwon, *One Place After Another*, p.29.

artists and, along similar lines to Kwon, he charted a useful genealogy of site-specificity which I follow and adopt at several strategic junctures in *Geographies of Violence*. However, although not entirely hostile to ‘the artist as ethnographer’—as his discussion of James Luna’s work illustrates—his overall negative tone betrays a limiting nostalgia for artistic practices sealed from disciplinary exchanges. Through a discussion of Gómez-Peña’s method of ‘reverse ethnography,’ on a more optimistic note, I maintain that the ‘ethnographic turn’ has opened up a high-yielding series of exchanges that have valuably expanded the site of artistic interventions. In other words, we should not dismiss the participant observation methodology characteristic of the ethnographic method but, mindful of the discipline’s potential stumbling blocks, focus on the lines of enquiry that it can open up.

It is with this positive tone that I discuss in the following two chapters the ‘documentary turn’ in relation to the works of Ursula Biemann and Chantal Akerman. I interlace this trend in documentary practices with the ‘ethnographic turn’ that Foster describes in his essay maintaining that video art practices have been largely segregated from the genealogy of other media, despite sharing an interest in expanded notions of site and participant observation methods characteristic of the ‘ethnographic turn.’ By doing so, I maintain that site-specificity as a theoretical framework has even farther implications and possibilities that has so far been acknowledged. Although in radically different ways, Biemann’s *Performing the Border* and Akerman’s *From the Other Side* adopt an ethnographic approach using participant-observation methods and use moving images in order to examine the spatial politics of the Mexico-U.S. border. Both works are an example of the functional site that Meyer discusses since the site of intervention and the site of reception are separated. I also pointed out that, in Akerman’s case, her approach is not free from the problems of ethnographic authority especially since she claimed that she went to the Mexico-U.S. border for a ‘sense of adventure.’

In examination of *Performing the Border*—that I examined through the lens of Slavoj Žižek’s notion of ‘systemic violence’—I argued that Biemann’s understanding of space owes a theoretical debt to ‘the spatial turn’ as it developed in the 1980s through the writings of thinkers such as Michel de Certeau and Doreen Massey. In Biemann’s

work, the site is not only that of the geopolitical terrains that she engages with—in this case the Mexico-U.S. border—but also the various moving image planes that she superimposes and edits in order to create a complex topology that helps us understand the movements and flows of capital. Discussing how her writings draw on and contribute to ‘third wave’ feminism, I examined how her work creates a complex assemblage of fact and fiction, creatively using digital media—interwoven with appropriated footage and digital animation—in order to tease out the complexities of this type of labour under the conditions of late capitalism and its accompanying representations. By looking at the various scenes she includes of women both dancing and taking various forms of transport, I argue that her film foregrounds corporeal im(mobilities) in order to draw attention to the sharp contrasts between the hypermobility of capital and the immobility of the low-skilled worker in the assembly line—trapped in a repetitive routine—whilst also discussing the colonisation of free time by the forces of capital. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s theories, I end the chapter by discussing the rhythmic quality of her work that interlaces images and sounds in order to reveal the movements and patterns of economic globalisation.

Turning to Akerman’s *From the Other Side*, I drew a connection between territory and violence—extensively considering her claim that appropriation of land is linked to bloodshed—whilst unpacking the intense attention that she pays to landscape. Linking her films to the genre of the travelogue, I examine Akerman’s ethnographic sensibility and visual cross-examinations—that in many respects dovetail with the traits Foster identifies in ‘The Artist as Ethnographer’—evident in both her fiction and documentary films. As well as discussing her work in relation to structuralist film, I relate *From the Other Side* within the genealogy of site-oriented practices by embedding her work to minimalism as well as the work of Robert Smithson. Both Kwon and Meyer discuss the work of Robert Smithson in relation to the functional site and Kwon and Foster place minimalism at the beginning of site-specific practices since, amongst others, it opened up innovative lines of inquiry regarding the spatial conditions of perception. As I mentioned, my account of site-oriented practices, however, by considering video practices, expands and redirects Kwon and Meyer’s genealogy of site-specificity. From a phenomenological standpoint,

I examine how Akerman expands the site of intervention and the way in which her film reveals how landscape is far from neutral but rather an ideologically laden space that powerfully plays into the narratives of the nation-state. Using Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the 'smooth space,' I claim that Akerman's film proposes a new way of relating to and thinking about territory, one free from the straightjacket of oppressive cartographical practices. Although I highlight some of the ways in which she risks ideological patronage in her ethnographic approach, I also point out that, through aesthetics and formal means, as well as the way she focuses on landscape, her work nevertheless offers valuable insights that critically enrich our understanding of the Mexico-U.S. borderlands.

Through the work of Teresa Margolles, I analyse the violence that has gripped the borderlands since the advent of the so-called 'drug war' in 2006. Examining the literature that deals with the graphic representations of violence—the writings of Susan Sontag and Mieke Bal, for example—I discuss Margolles' work in connection to abstraction and, in this context, compare it in particular to that of Leon Golub. I also reflect on Margolles' abstract forms of representation vis-à-vis the de-individualised abstraction created by the portrayal of victims as statistical numbers. Turning to her morbid use of materials, I contextualise her work within the Viennese Actionist school. Using the concept of the 'trace', as theorised by academics such as Bal, and comparing her work to that of Doris Salcedo, I analyse Margolles' strategy of focusing on the objects left behind by victims. Considering Margolles' *Fumus Fugiens* I argue that by addressing the sense of smell—often associated with disease and lack of hygiene—she thrusts the bodies of both the viewer and the victims of violence into an unprecedented and intimate encounter. At several points, I discuss the ethical implications of Margolles' practice maintaining that her works perpetrate a kind of violence on the bodies of the deceased by using their remains for artistic purposes. However, she does not do this gratuitously since her work also represents violence in a way that mainstream forms of technology and communication are unable to. Indicative of the violence inherent in its representation, Margolles' works are powerful illustrations of the exploitation of the neoliberalist system

Although I point out the ways in which Margolles' work can be situated within the 'ethnographic turn' and institutional critique, I also underline that her artistic practice, unlike those of the other artists that I have examined in *Geographies of Violence*, is less directly involved with the spatial politics of the Mexico-U.S. border. For her, the site of intervention is not concerned as much with the ideologically inscribed terrain of the border but rather on the violence that has gripped Mexico. This concern can still be placed within the parameters of site-oriented practices and the ethnographic turn since, as Foster claimed in 'The Artist as 'Ethnographer,' the site has come to include a range of issues including '[...] desire or disease, AIDS or homelessness [...]'⁷⁹⁹ Although she is less concerned with geopolitical issues than the other artists I have discussed, I have included her work in this dissertation since her practice deals very directly with the manifestations of violence that mark the Mexico-U.S. borderlands. To my knowledge, no other artist has engaged so extensively with the blood stained events that have spilled over the region in recent years. Not engaging with this aspect of the borderlands would have left a large lacuna in a dissertation concerned with violence and the Mexico-U.S. border. Her work also served as a platform to question how a range of artistic practices—including Krzysztof Wodiczko and Ursula Biemann's—can propose innovative forms of representing violence through interviews, testimonies and, in the case of Margolles, using the very materiality of death.

Especially as charted by Kwon, but also Foster and Meyer, I have placed all of the artworks that I discuss within my own account of site-specificity that, although stems from already existing examinations, modifies and expands them opening up the potential of this powerful theoretical framework. In various overlapping and intersecting ways I discussed 'new genre public art' in relation to the BAW/TAF; institutional critique as it was pertinent to both the practice of Gómez-Peña and Margolles; the 'ethnographic turn' in relation to Gómez-Peña, Akerman, Biemann and, to some extent, Margolles; and finally, the legacies of land art and minimalism in relation to Akerman's work. Throughout my engagement with site-oriented practices

⁷⁹⁹ Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer,' in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 184.

I have continuously made reference to ‘turns’ in artistic practice—namely the ethnographic, documentary, mobility and spatial turn. A ‘turn,’ however, contrary to what I have tried to articulate, denotes a change of position, orientation, a linear ‘moving away’ or a ‘moving towards.’ By looking at the very diverse works of these artists, and placing them within a non-linear framework of site-oriented practices, I have shown how these turns are not separate developments but rather dialogically converge and coincide at numerous junctures. The principle point of connection that I focus on is that of the intersection between geopolitics and site-oriented practices.

There are many other art projects that engage with nation-state borders that I would have liked to have both the time and space to explore. I would have been especially keen to examine artworks that have engaged and compared different nation-state borders. For instance, Antoni Muntadas, an artist that I would have liked to include, created a complex documentary entitled *On Translation: Fear/Miedo* in 2005 that asked various people—from migrants to university professors—to discuss fear in relation to the Mexico-U.S. border. In his video, these interviews were interlaced with various TV newscasts about the border as well as military surveillance footage. Two years later, Muntadas created *On Translation: Miedo/Jauf* using the same format as *Fear/Miedo* but this time zoning in on the Tarifa-Tangiers crossing.⁸⁰⁰ Another example would be, as I briefly discussed in the third chapter, Ursula Biemann’s ongoing concern with national borders as seen in her later works such as *Sahara Chronicles* (2006-2007). We can also think of Christian Philipp Müller’s *Green Border* in which the artist photographed himself crossing Austria’s eight national borders in 1993.⁸⁰¹ As if taking Müller’s concept and widening its scope, UK-based artists Heath Bunting and Kayle Brandon, for their ongoing project *Border Xing*, have since 2002 attempted to cross illegally the national borders of various European countries undetected. Traveling through rivers, mountains and forests they found numerous intricate ways of crossing a variety of European borders without detection.

⁸⁰⁰ For more information on these two projects see Octavi Rofes, ‘Translations: Facing the Wall,’ in *Muntadas: Entre/Between* (Barcelona: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2011).

⁸⁰¹ T. J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), p.13.

They then created an online website, the Border Xing Guide, that gives detailed information about their crossings.⁸⁰²

But although the topic of nation-state borders and site-oriented practices could be expanded in terms of geographical scope and the number of artworks taken into consideration, I have opted instead for carefully selected case studies. It is true that choosing fewer works has meant that this dissertation does not give a comprehensive survey of the artistic production of the region or of site-oriented practices engaging with nation-state borders. However, it has allowed me to chart a genealogy of site-oriented practices in relation to the geopolitical fabric of the Mexico-U.S. border. In this way, I have been able to foreground the ways in which the powerful theoretical framework of site-specificity could be expanded in order to include video and performance art practices. It has also given me the opportunity to provide an account and a greater understanding of the complexities inherent in the Mexico-U.S. border, its representations and its pervasiveness in framing a myriad of realities and relationships.

My method allows for an intensive exploration of individual artists or collectives—as in the case of the BAW/TAF—rather than a less expansive account of a range of practices that have taken place across the border. I have chosen to stay away from the projects commissioned by InSite—that constitute a significant proportion of the works that have taken place across the Mexico-U.S. border—largely because I am suspicious of the biennial's complicity in fostering binational relations in a way that promotes NAFTA's policies, especially since the biennial's inception roughly coincided with the advent of this agreement. As I outlined in the introduction, I also think that many of the works that took place under its auspices—like Téllez's that I discussed in the introduction—risk complicity with the spectacle already framing the Mexico-U.S. borderlands.

The heightened attention paid to the forces of globalisation—that seemingly melt geopolitical borders with increasingly sophisticated modes of transport and communication—should be at least equally matched by an insistence that the nation-

⁸⁰² Emma Cocker, 'Border Crossing: Practices for Beating the Bounds,' in *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, Experience and Spaces In-Between* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp.50-56.

state is still the chief organiser of economic, social and political relations. Historical narratives and identity politics—still firmly latched to the bosom of the nation-state—nourish the current world-system that renders certain lives disposable, like the figure of the migrant and the sweatshop worker. In this and in other ways, the current post-Westphalian model is a discriminatory one that has to prioritise the lives of some over that of others based on factors such as nationality, ethnicity, and income.

Ultimately, my extensive discussion of the politics of the region in relation to contemporary artistic practices and issues of representation reflects my own personal investment in the region and my desire to tap into the fertile potential that exists at the crossroads of politics and aesthetics. I think that art and politics can intersect in various ways that help re-imagine these violent and uneven geographies, propose novel ways of relating to one another and suggest strategies to iron out the various inequalities that sustain the current geopolitical system.

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Son of Border Crisis. Written and performed by Guillermo Gómez-Peña, directed and produced Isaac Artenstein. San Diego: Cinewest Productions and SUSHI Inc., 1991.

South. Directed by Chantal Akerman. Brussels: Paradise Films, 1999.

Spiral Jetty. Directed by Robert Smithson and Nancy Holt. New York: Electronic Arts Intermix: 2000.

The Temple of Confessions. Written and performed by Guillermo Gómez-Peña. San Francisco: La Pocha Nostra, 1996.

Workers Leaving the Factory. Directed and produced by Harun Farocki. Berlin: Filmproduktion, 1995.



Plate 0.1 Allan Sekula, *Dead Letter Office* (Republican Convention), 1997.



Plate 0.2 Allan Sekula, *Dead Letter Office* (Ensenada), 1997.

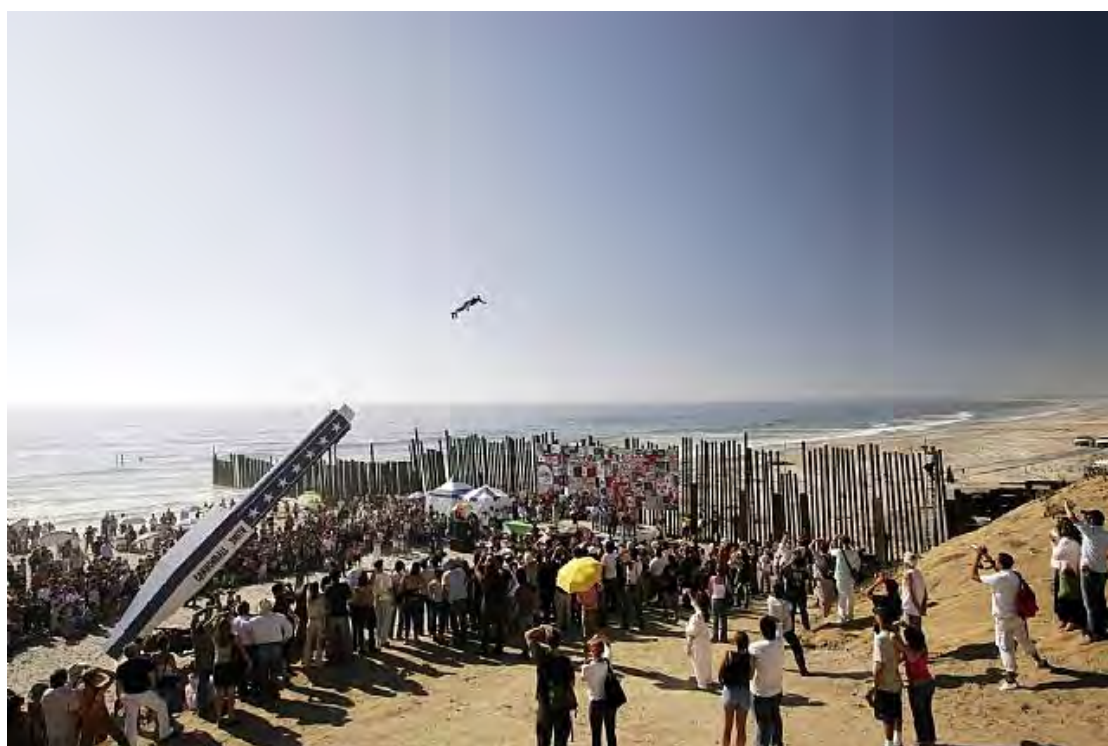


Plate 0.3 Javier Téllez, *One Flew Over the Void*, 2005.



Plate 0.4 César Saëz, *Geostationary Banana Over Texas*, 2008.



Plate 1.1 The Border Art Workshop/ Taller de Arte Fronterizo. *The End of the Line*, 1986.



Plate 1.2 The Border Art Workshop/ Taller de Arte Fronterizo. *The End of the Line*, 1986.



Plate 1.3 The Border Art Workshop/ Taller de Arte Fronterizo. *The End of the Line*, 1986.



Plate 1.4 The Border Art Workshop/ Taller de Arte Fronterizo. *The End of the Line*, 1986.



Plate 1.5 Proceso Pentágono. *El Secuestro* (Kidnapping), Mexico City, 1973.



Plate 1.6 Asco. *First Supper (After a Major Riot)*, 1974.

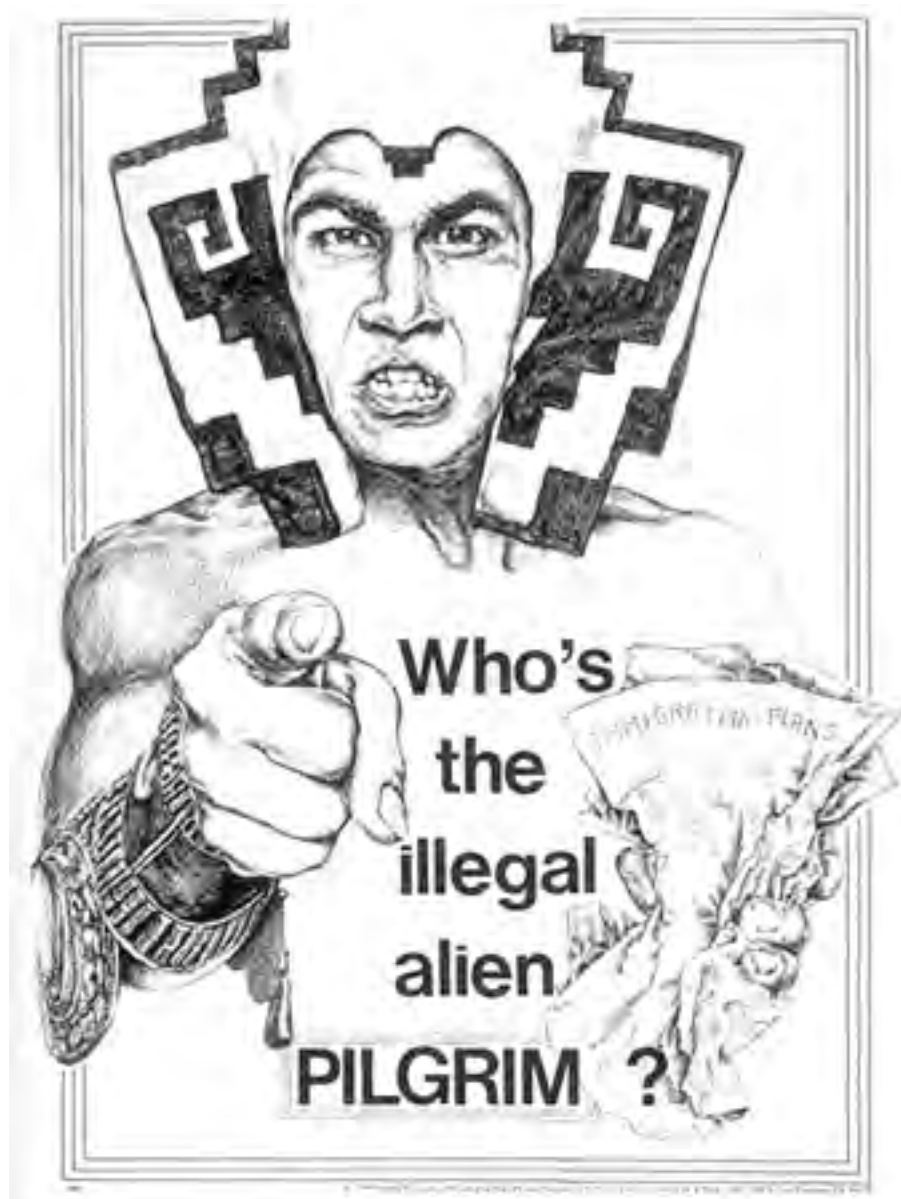


Plate 1.7 Yolanda M. López, *Who's the Illegal Alien Pilgrim?* 1978.



Plate 1.8 David Ávalos. *Lotería Chicana*, 1983.



Plate1.9 Suzanne Lacy, *Whisper, The Waves, the Wind*, 1984.



Plate 1.10 Oskar Schlemmer, *The Triadic Ballet*, 1922.



Plate 1.11 The Border Art Workshop/ Taller de Arte Fronterizo. *The End of the Line*, 1986.



Plate 1.12 The Border Art Workshop/ Taller de Arte Fronterizo. *The End of the Line*, 1986.



Plate 1.13 The Border Art Workshop/ Taller de Arte Fronterizo. *The End of the Line*, 1986.



Plate 1.14 The Border Art Workshop/ Taller de Arte Fronterizo. *The End of the Line*, 1986.



Plate 1.15 The Border Art Workshop/ Taller de Arte Fronterizo. *The End of the Line*, 1987.



Plate 1.16 Victor Ochoa, *Border Bingo/ Lotería Fronteriza*, 1987



Plate 1.17 Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1979.



Plate 1.18 David Ávalos, *Border Fence as Möbius Strip* (*Border Realities III*), 1987.

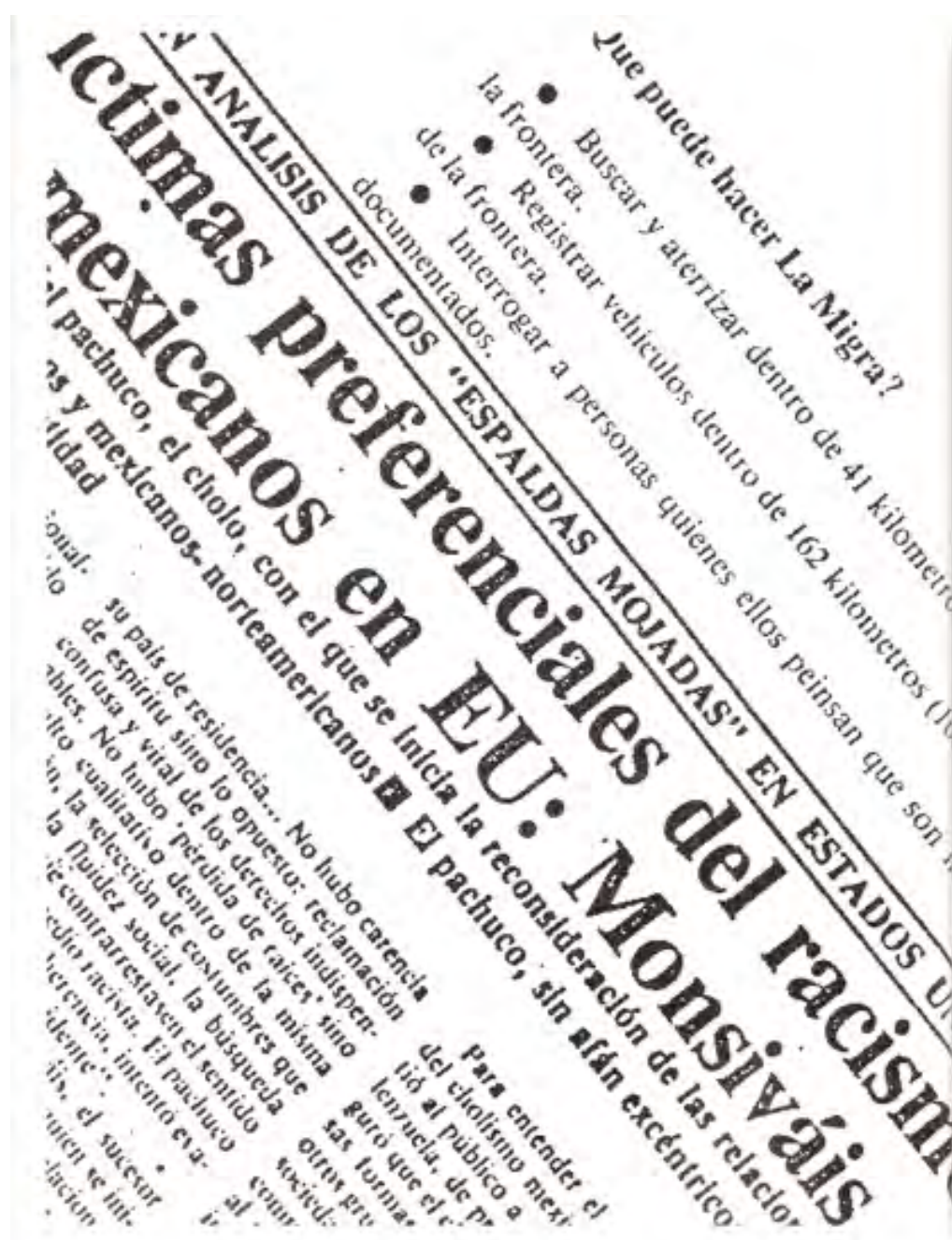


Plate 1.19 Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo
The Border Art Workshop (BAW/TAF) 1984-1989
 (retrospective catalogue), 1988.

EL
¿Que puede hacer La Migra?

OTRO y a 41 kilometros

LADO r 462 kilometros

• Interrogar a las personas que los peines

UNA GUIA PARA LOS INDOCUMENTADOS EN EL

¿Que no puede hacer La Migra?

BORDER PATROL AGENT

As a career a co mejor mación.)

- Interrogarle sim
- Estas son las le va a observarlas.

ción l juez : rmiso

tenga ara ir

decir

¿Que pasa si La Migra me detiene?

RECUERDE:

1. Usted no tiene que contestar ninguna pregunta hasta

U. S. Department of Justice Immigration and Naturalization Service

Si le preguntan donde nació, no e

Pride in our past
Faith in our future




Plate 1.20 Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo
The Border Art Workshop (BAW/TAF) 1984-1989
 (retrospective catalogue), 1988.

"A la distancia de un grito
a la distancia de una jornada están ya
¡Oh, padre!
Recibid a vuestros huéspedes
los del oriente, los hombres barbados
que traen la señal de Ku, la deidad."

Chilam Balam de Chumayel
(Plaza de Colón, Madrid)



"At the distance of a scream
at the distance of a journey, they are already there
Oh, father!
Welcome your guests from the South,
the beardless dark men
who bring the sign of hunger
and the wish to work."

The Broken Line
(Mexican-American Border)

Plate 1.21 Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo
The Border Art Workshop (BAW/TAF) 1984-1989
(retrospective catalogue), 1988.



Plate 1.22 The Border Art Workshop/ Taller de Arte Fronterizo. *The End of the Line*, 1986.



Plate 1.23 Border Art Workshop/ Taller de Arte Fronterizo, *The End of the Line* (Café Urgente), 1987.



Plate 2.1 Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians*, 1992.



Plate 2.2 Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* (Archival Footage of 'Natives'), 1992.



Plate 2.3 Marcel Broodthaers, *Museum of Modern Art, Département des Aigles*, 1968.



Plate 2.4 Adrian Piper, *Mythic Being: I Embody Everything You Most Hate and Fear*, 1975.



Plate 2.5 Renée Green, *Mise-en-scène*, 1991.



Plate 2.6 Fred Wilson, *Mining the Museum*, 1992.



Plate 2.7 Nikki S. Lee, *The Hispanic Project (1)*, 1998.



Plate 2.8 James Luna, *Artifact Piece*, 1987.



Plate 2.9 James Luna, *Take a Picture with a Real Indian*, 1991.

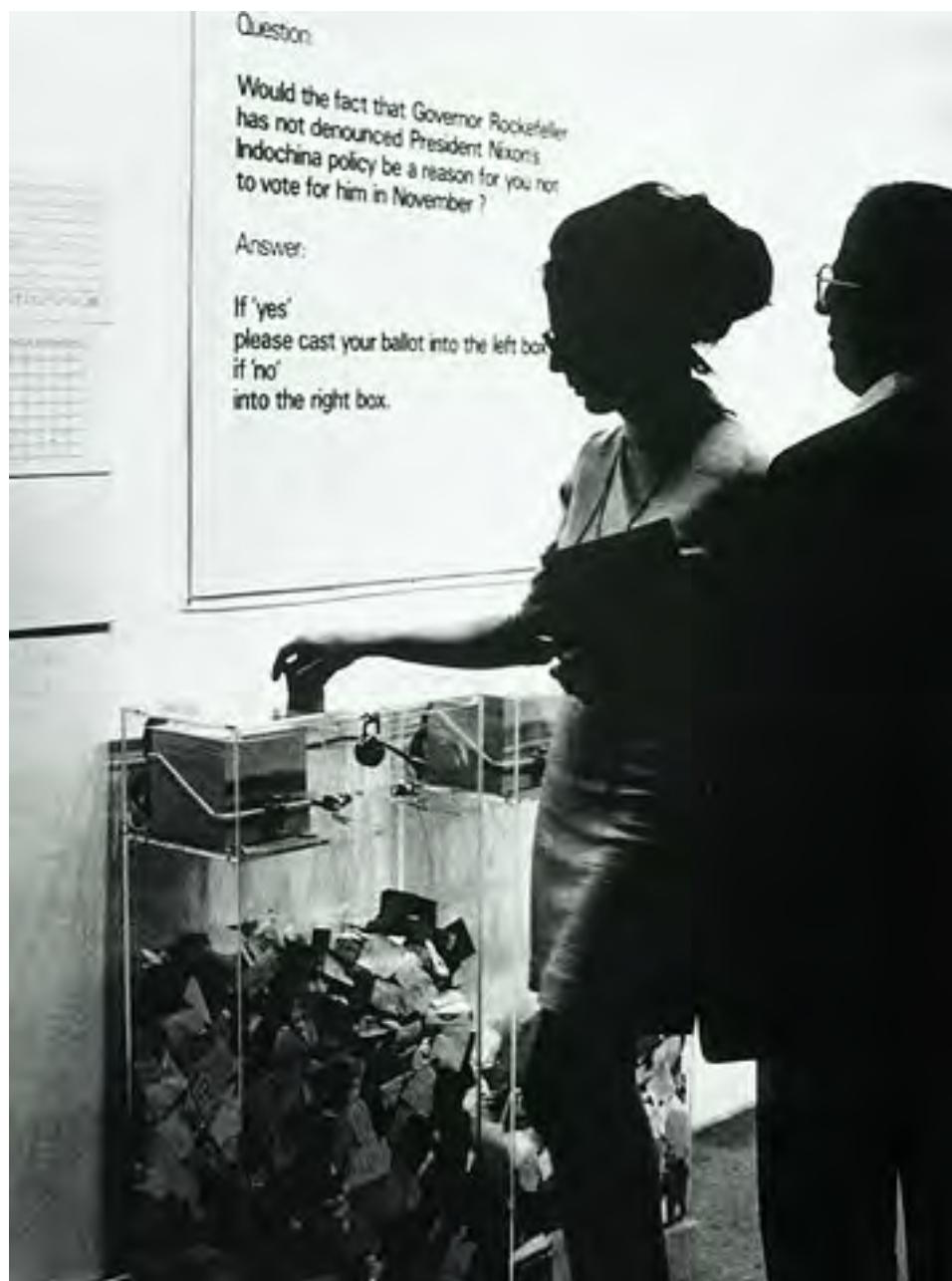


Plate 2.10 Hans Haacke, *MOMA Poll*, 1970.



Plate 2.11 Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *The Temple of Confessions*, 1994.

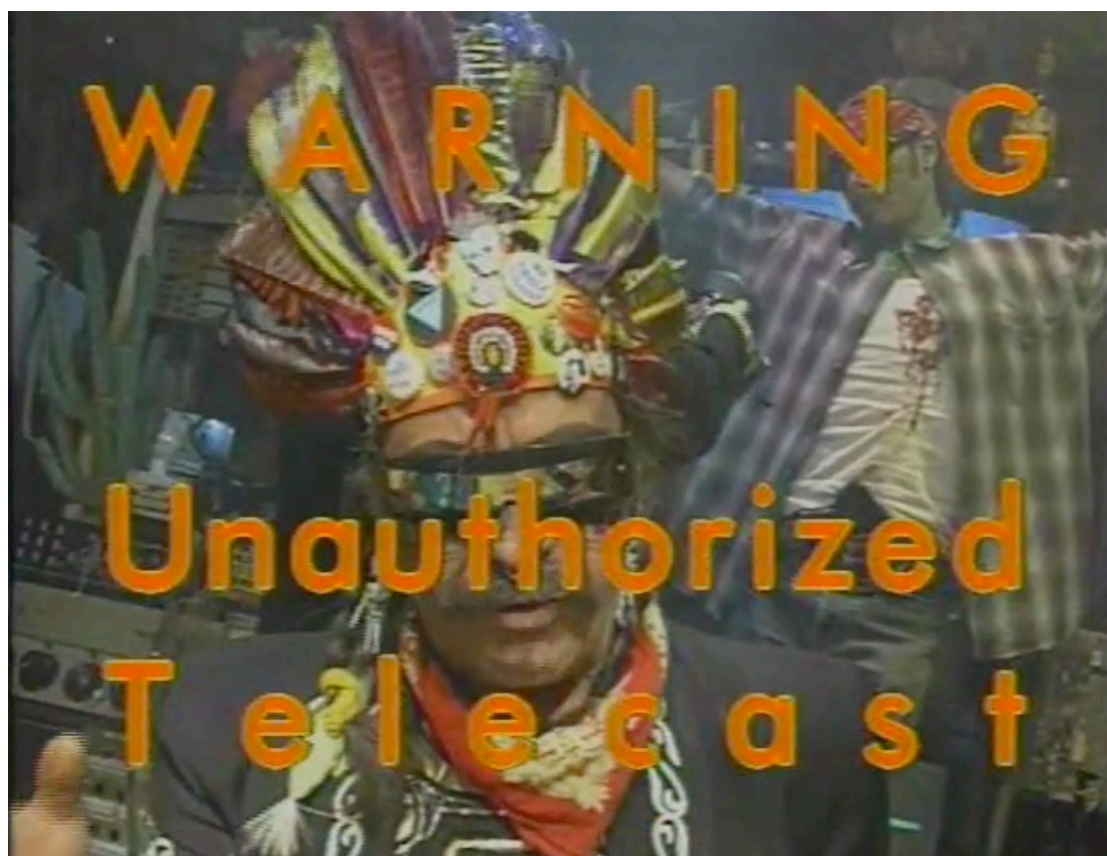


Plate 2.12 Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Naftaztec: Pirate Cyber-TV for A.D. 2000* (Unauthorized Telecast), 1994.



Plate 2.13 Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Naftaztec: Pirate Cyber-TV for A.D. 2000* (Priest/Journalist), 1994.



Plate 2.14 Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Naftaztec: Pirate Cyber-TV for A.D. 2000* (Post-CNN Chicano Art), 1994.



Plate 2.15 Claes Oldenburg, *Mouse Museum*, 1965-1967.



Plate 2.16 Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Naftaztec: Pirate Cyber-TV for A.D. 2000* (Miss Discovery), 1994.



Plate 2.17 Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Naftaztec: Pirate Cyber-TV for A.D. 2000* (Battle), 1994.



Plate 2.18 Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco, *The Couple in the Cage* ('Freak Show'), 1993.



Plate 3.1 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Opening Scene), 1999.

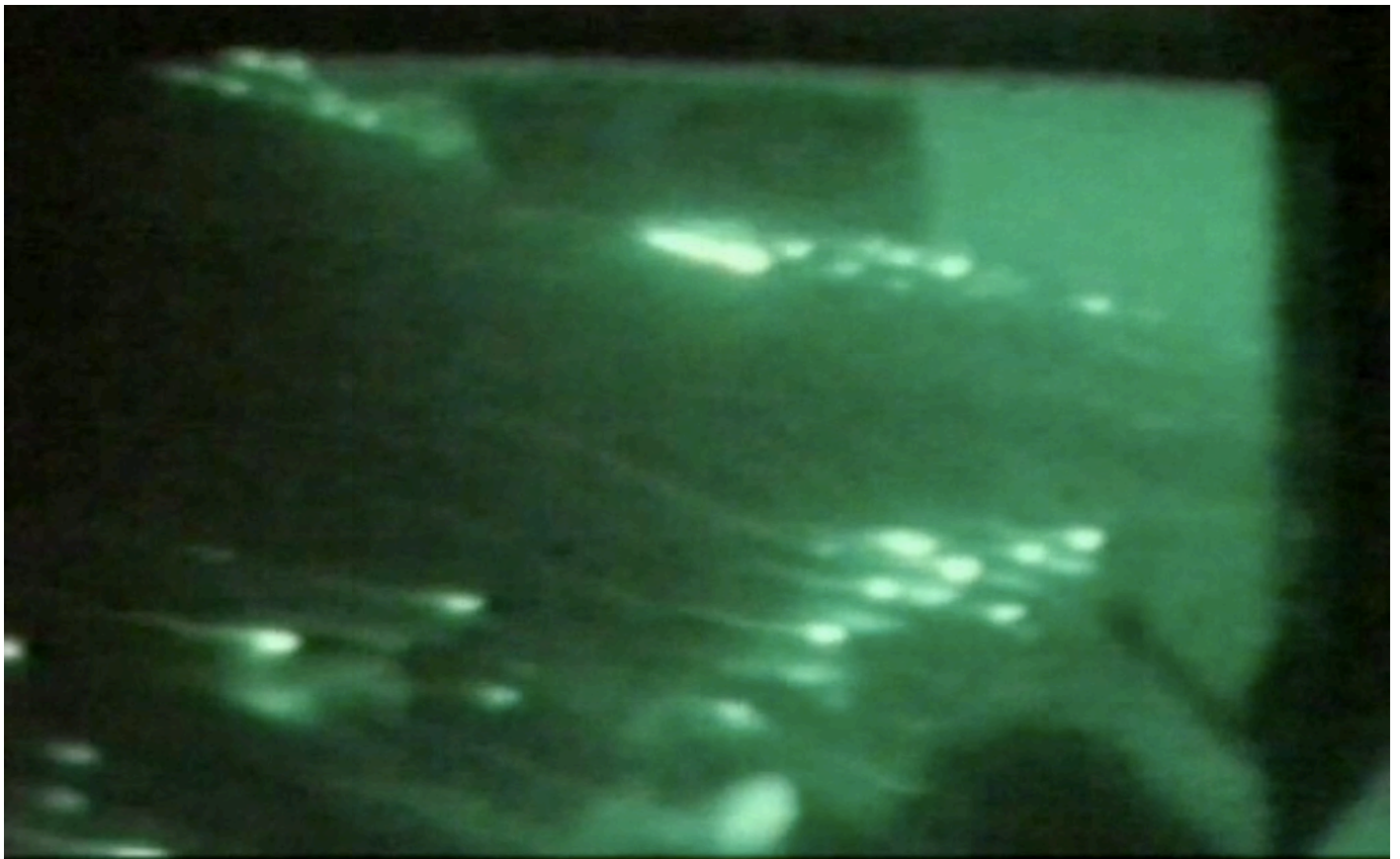


Plate 3.2 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Night Vision), 1999.



Plate 3.3 Hannah Hoch, *Das schöne Mädchen*, 1920.



Plate 3.4 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Slums), 1999.



Plate 3.5 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Woman Washing Clothes), 1999.



Plate 3.6 Allan Sekula, *This Ain't China*, 1974.



Plate 3.8 Steve McQueen, *Western Deep*, 2002.



Plate 3.9 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Women Leaving the Factory), 1999.



Plate 3.10 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Map), 1999.



Plate 3.11 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Digital Animation), 1999.



Plate 3.12 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Black and White Map), 1999.



Plate 3.13. Harun Farocki, *Workers Leaving the Factory*, 1995.

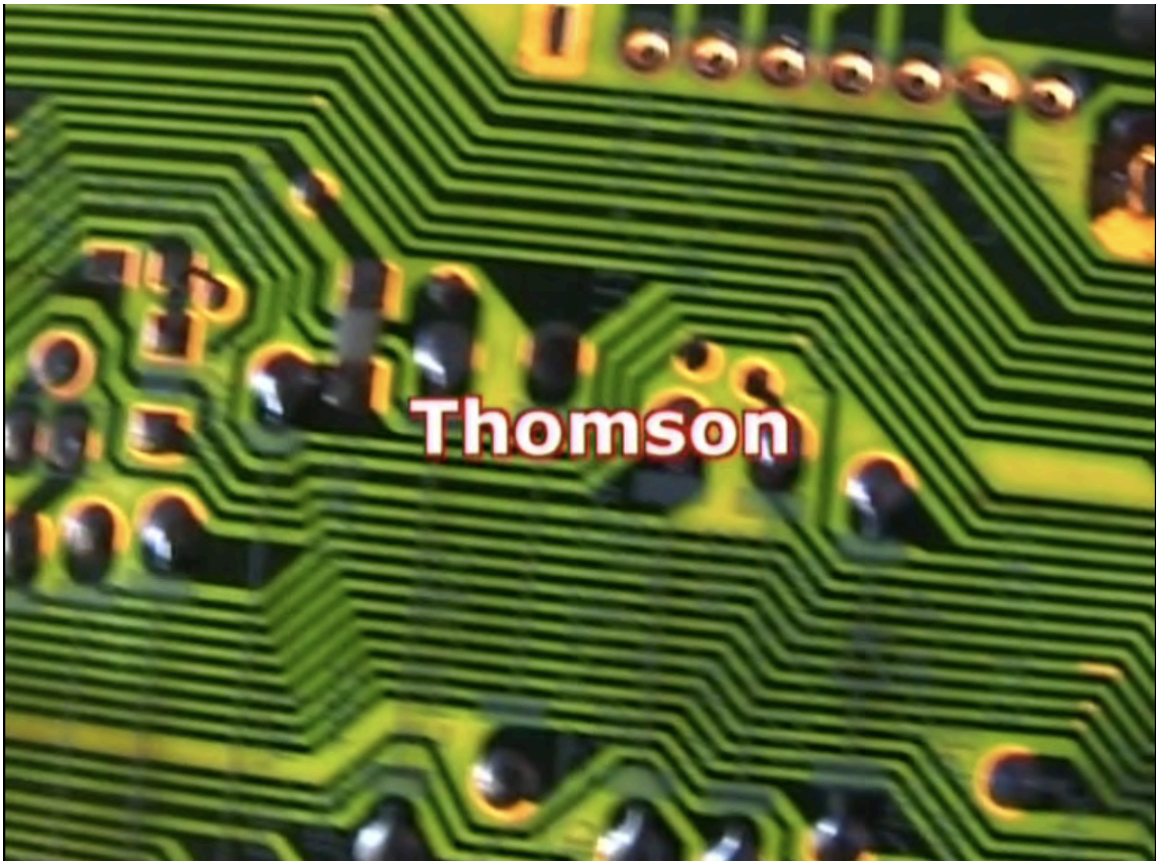


Plate 3.14 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Microchip), 1999.



Plate 3.15 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Guard Waving), 1999.

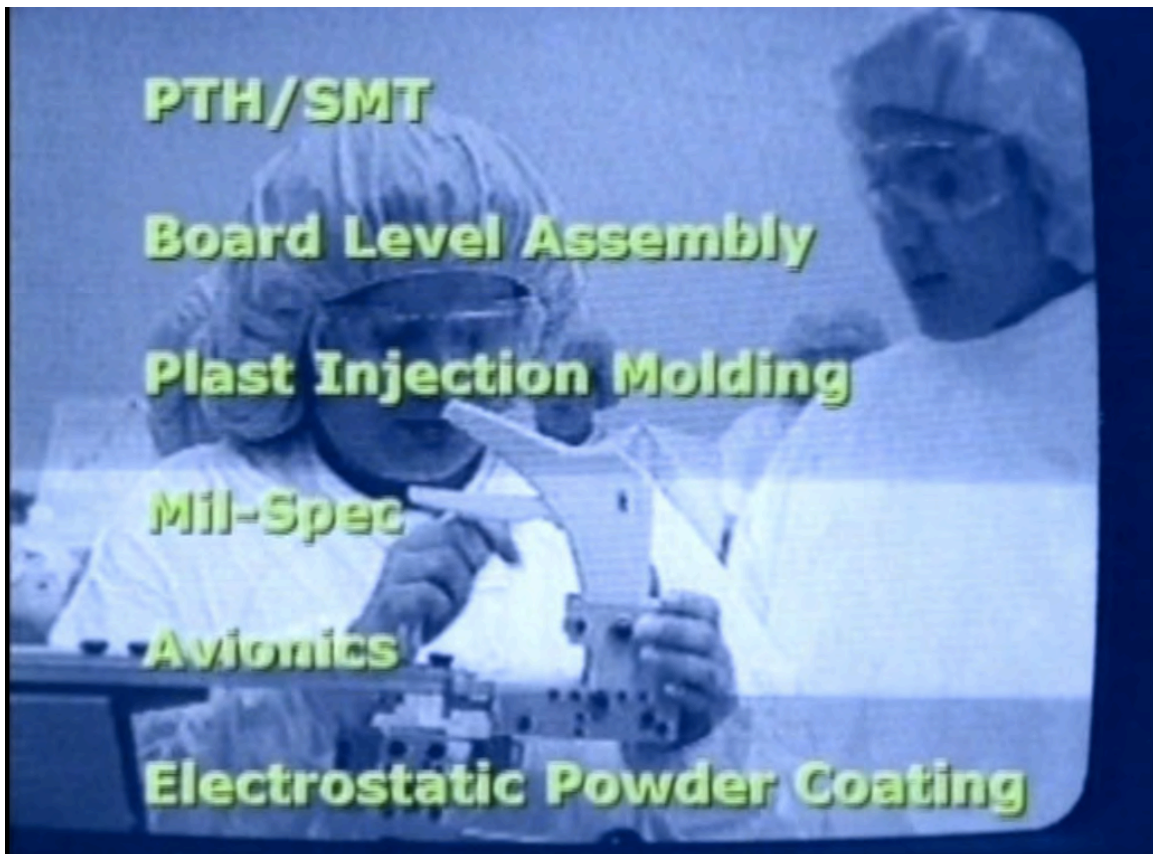


Plate 3.16 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Corporate Advertisement), 1999.



Plate 3.17 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Corporate Advertisement 'RCA'), 1999.



Plate 3.18 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Dancing), 1999.



Plate 3.19 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Interview), 1999.



Plate 3.20 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (TV Screen), 1999.



Plate 3.21 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Zona Minada Animation), 1999.



Plate 3.22 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Driving), 1999.



Plate 3.23 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Driving /Yellow Tint), 1999.



Plate 3.24 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Driving/Black and White), 1999.



Plate 3.25 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Bus), 1999.



Plate 3.26 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Interior of Bus), 1999.



Plate 3.27 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Crossing Rio Bravo), 1999.



Plate 3.28 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Men on Horseback), 1999.



Plate 3.29 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Heat), 1999.



Plate 3.30 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Dancing in Night Club), 1999.



Plate 3.31 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Corona Advertisement), 1999.



Plate 3.32 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Mariachis), 1999.



Plate 4.1 Lumière Brothers, *Leaving Jerusalem By Train*, 1896.



Plate 4.2 James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 1941.



Plate 4.3 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Landscape), 2002.



Plate 4.4 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Landscape), 2002.



Plate 4.5 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Landscape), 2002.



Plate 4.6 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side (Fence)*, 2002.



Plate 4.7 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Fence), 2002.



Plate 4.8 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Fence), 2002.



Plate 4.9 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Landscape), 2002.



Plate 4.10 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Interview), 2002.



Plate 4.11Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side (Fence)*, 2002.



Plate 4.12 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side (Fence)*, 2002.



Plate 4.13 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Night), 2002.



Plate 4.14 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Environment Sign), 2002.



Plate 4.15 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Helicopter Search), 2002.



Plate 4.16 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Military Technology), 2002.



Plate 4.17 Michael Snow, *La Région Centrale*, 1971.



Plate 4.18 Andy Warhol, *Empire*, 1964.



Plate 4.19 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Fence), 2002.



Plate 4.20 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Fence), 2002.



Plate 4.21 Richard Serra, *Frame*, 1969.



Plate 4.22 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Interview), 2002.



Plate 4.23 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Interview), 2002.



Plate 4.24 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (People Walking), 2002.



Plate 4.25 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Dead End), 2002.

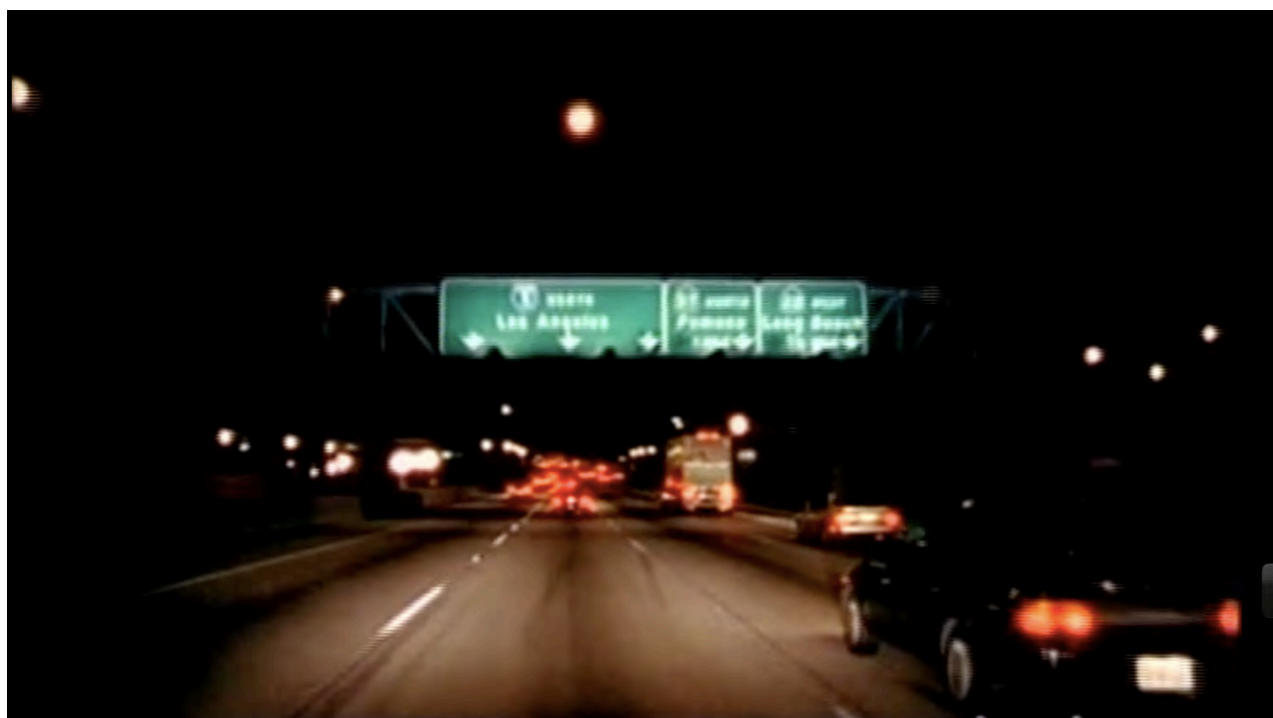


Plate 4.26 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (L.A.), 2002.



Plate 4.27 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Installation View), 2002.



Plate 4.28 Chantal Akerman, *Une Voix Dans le Desert*, 2002.



Plate 4.29 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Shops), 2002.



Plate 4.30 Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970.



Plate 4.31 Chantal Akerman, *From the Other Side* (Sports), 2002.



Plate 5.1 Teresa Margolles, *Cards to Cut Out Cocaine*, 2009.



Plate 5.2 Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About?* (Flag), 2009.



Plate 5.3 Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About?* (Installation With Embroidered Banners), 2009.

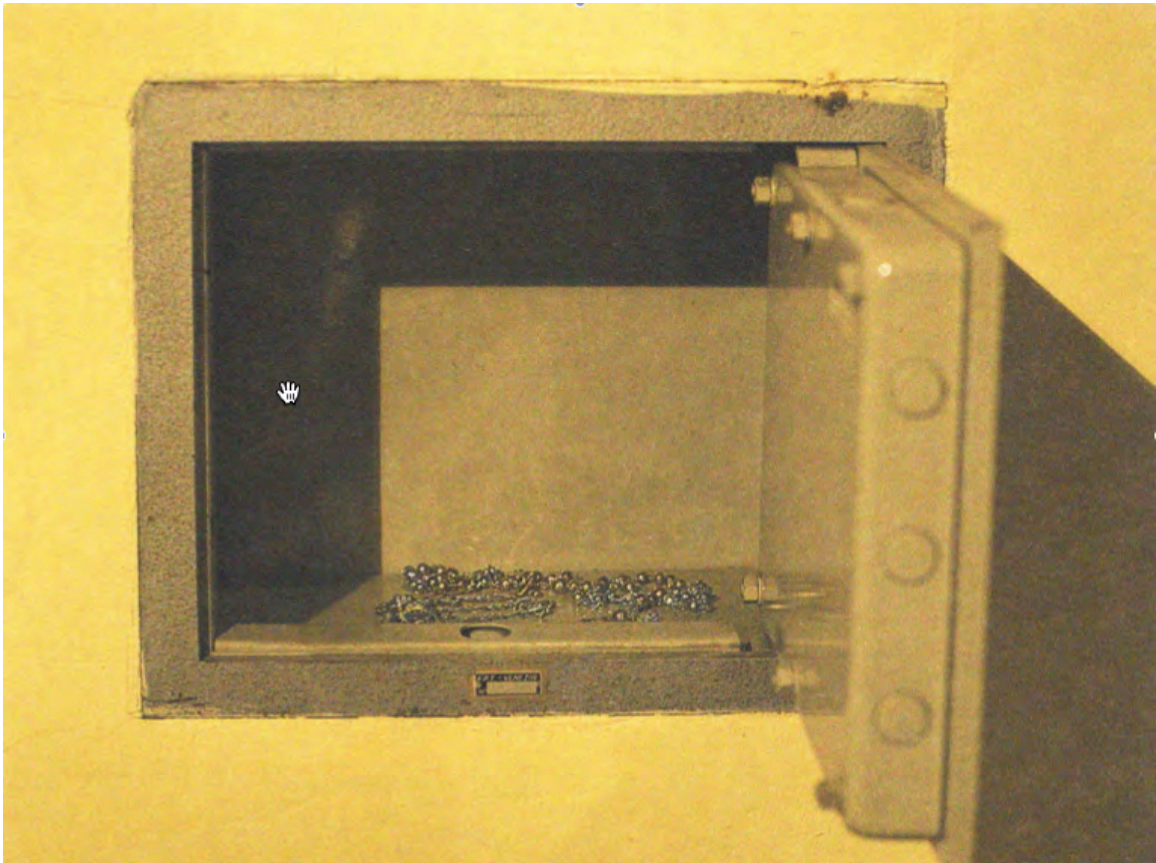


Plate 5.4 Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About?* (Safety Box), 2009.



Plate 5.5 Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About?* (Installation of Fabrics Used to Clean Murder Sites), 2009.

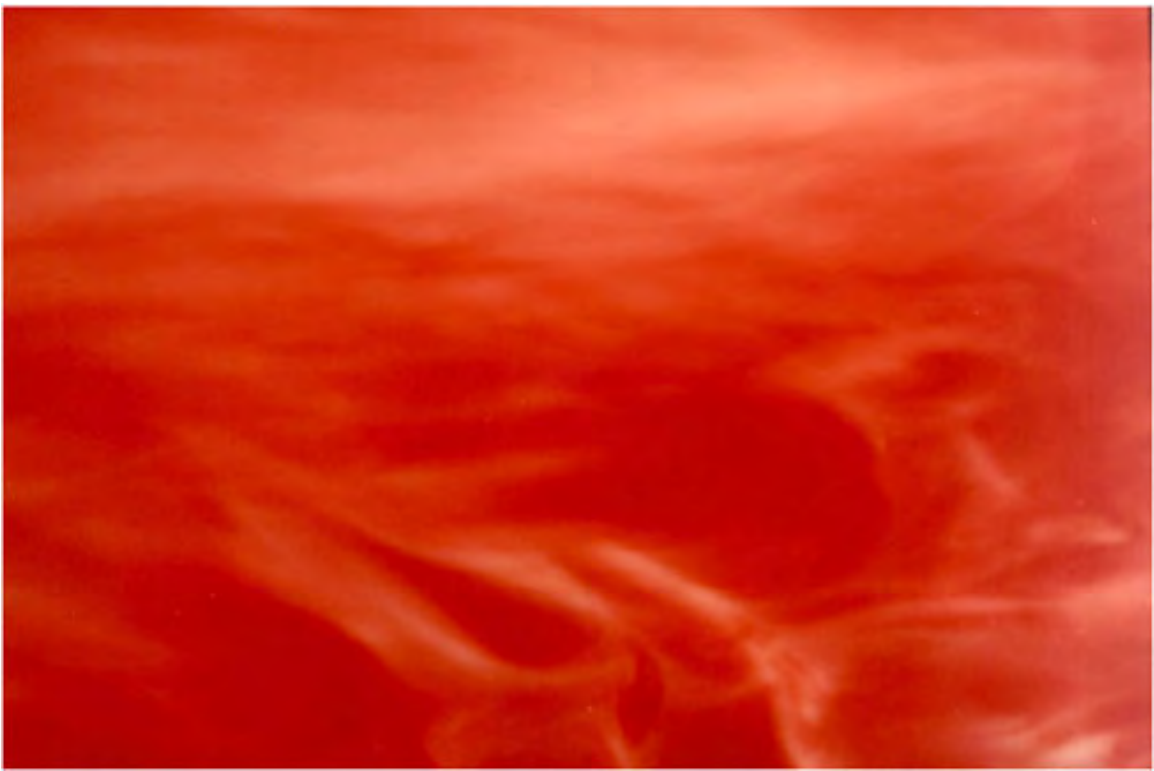


Plate 5.6 Andres Serrano, *Bloodscape V*, 1989.



Plate 5.7 Peter Eisenman, *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, 2005.



Plate 5.8 Gaesta-Springall Arquitectos, *Memorial to the Victims of Violence*, 2013.



Plate 5.9 Leon Golub, *Napalm Shield I*, 1970-1971.



Plate 5.10 SEMEFO, *Lavatio Corporis*, 1993.



Plate 5.11 SEMEFO, *Dermis*, 1996.



Plate 5.12 Yves, Klein, *Anthropométries Of the Blue Epoch*, 1960.



Plate 5.13 Teresa Margolles, *Tongue*, 2000.



Plate 5.14 Teresa Margolles, *Vaporización*, 2001.

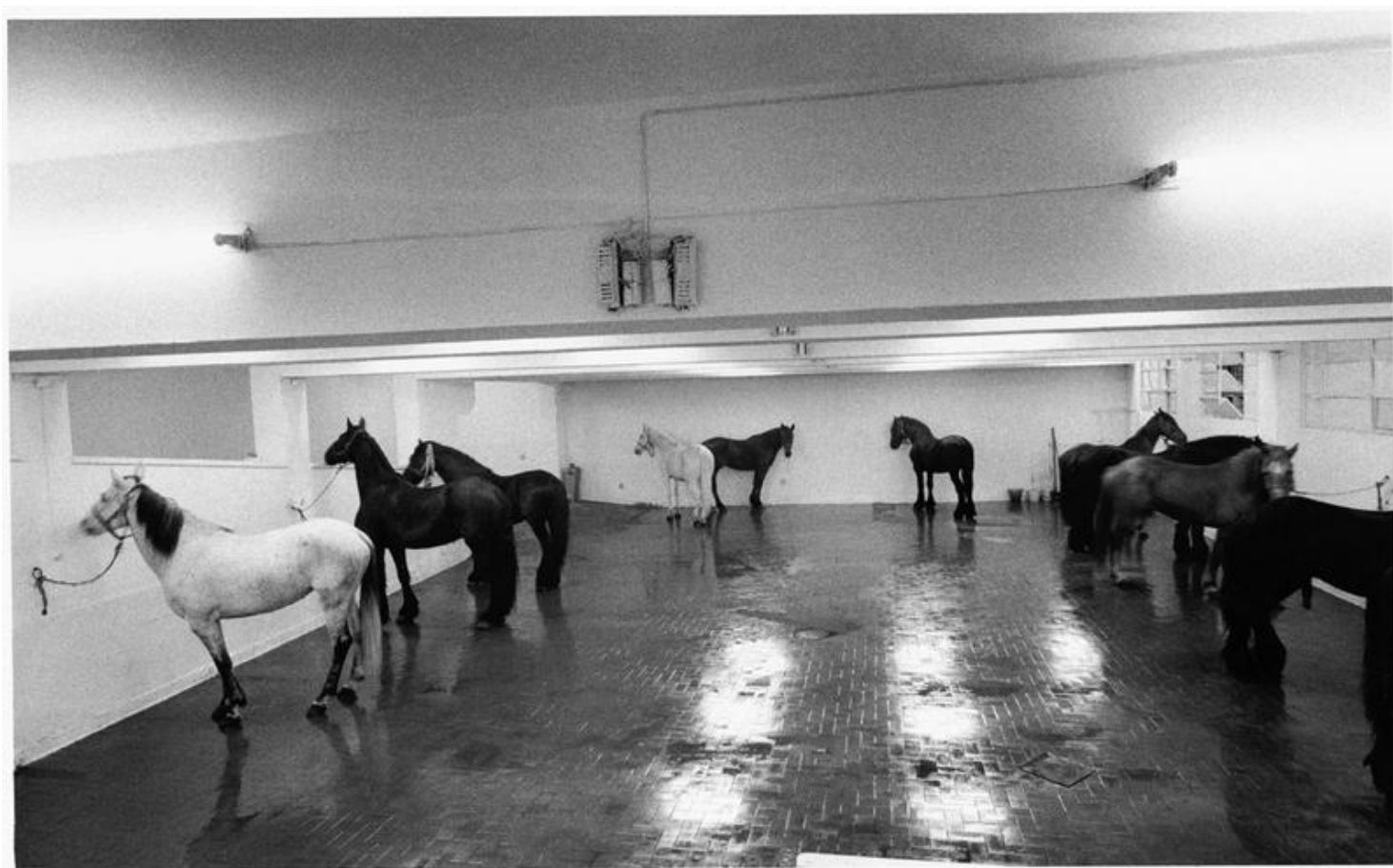


Plate 5.15 Jannis Kounellis, *Senza Titolo (12 cavalli)*
(Untitled [12 horses]), 1968.



Plate 5.16 Joseph Beuys, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965.



Plate 5.17 Jana Sterbak, *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic*, 1987.



Plate 5.18 Joseph Beuys, *Plight*, 1985.



Plate 5.19 Teresa Margolles, *Lote Bravo, Lomas de Poleo, Anapra y Cerro de Cristo Negro*, 2005.



Plate 5.20 Teresa Margolles, *Lote Bravo, Lomas de Poleo, Anapra y Cerro de Cristo Negro (Adobe Tombstones)*, 2005.



Plate 5.21 Regina Galindo, *Who Can Erase the Traces?*, 2005.

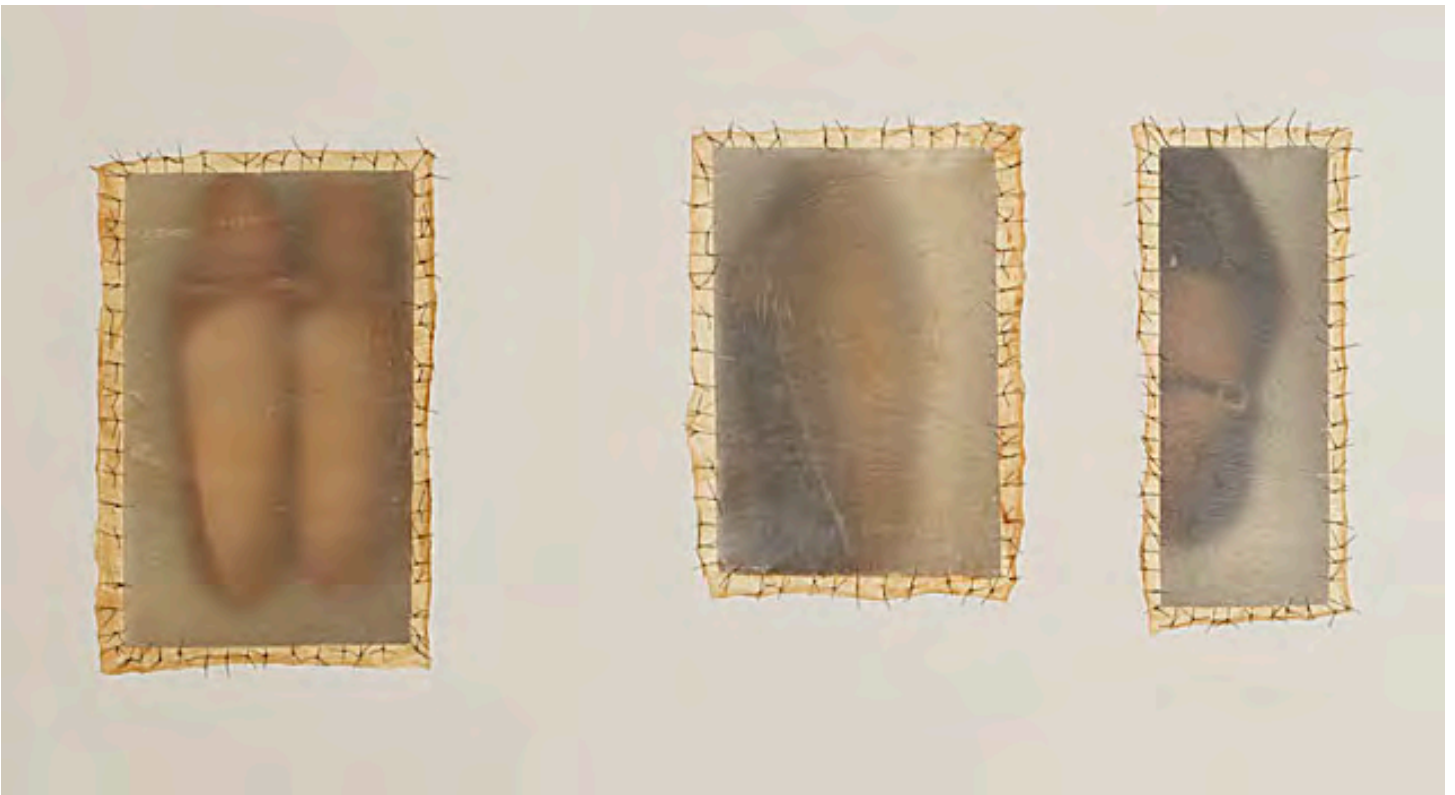


Plate 5.22 Doris Salcedo, *Atrabilarios*, 1993.



Plate 5.23 Christian Boltanski, *Canada*, 1998.

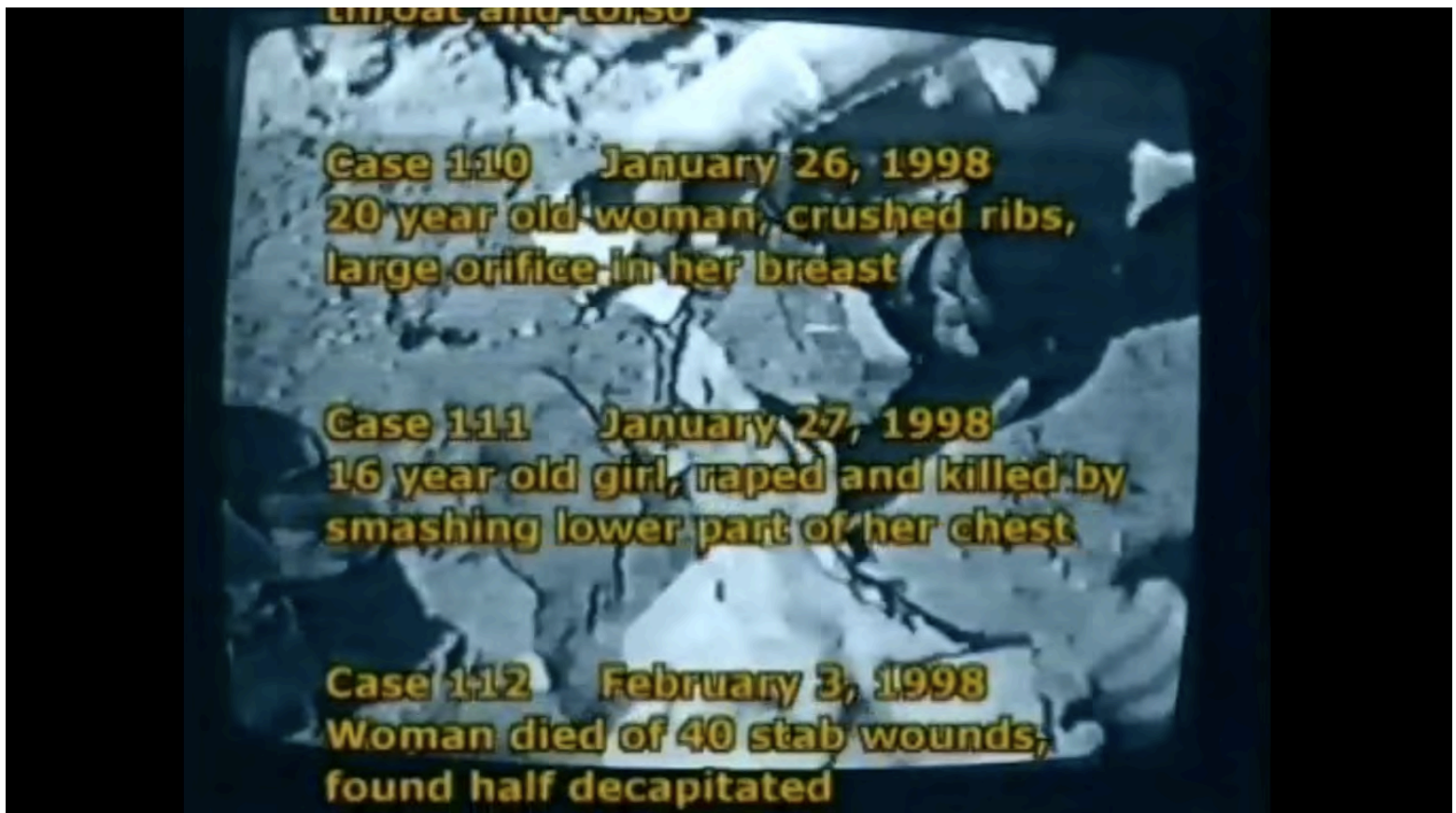


Plate 5.24 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border* (Excavating a Corpse), 1999.



Plate 5.25 Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About?* (Cleaning the Floor), 2009.



Plate 5.26 Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Alien Staff*, 1993.



Plate 5.27 Krzysztof Wodiczko, *The Border Projection*, 1988.



Plate 5.28 Krzysztof Wodiczko, *The Border Projection*, 1988.



Plate 5.29 Krzysztof Wodiczko, *The Tijuana Projection*, 2001.



Plate 5.30 Teresa Margolles, *What Else Could We Talk About?* (Embassy), 2009.